



Tishman Environment  
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# The Goals We Already Knew: New School Sustainability Student Ludovica Martella Speaks at UN Side Panel



When the United Nations (UN) released the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on the first day of 2016, Greta had not protested outside of the Swedish Parliament yet, the world was not at 350 gigatons yet, and the United States election fever was burning. Now in 2019, a youth movement has caught fire under the pressures of rapidly declining climate conditions with little global participation or concern and has teamed up alongside climate organizations alike to document and participate in the reaction and action to the ongoing climate crisis.

International Buddhist and peace empowerment nonprofit organization with consultative status to the UN, [Soka Gakkai International](#), hosted a panel discussion side event on September 23rd, in the midst of the climate action week and UN General Assembly (UNGA), to present the results of a survey on awareness of and interests in the SDGs held in high schools in Japan, United Kingdom and United States. The four-person panel included Mr. Ramu Damodaran, Chief of the [United Nations Academic Impact](#), Dr. Kusumita P. Pedersen, a member of [Climate Action Task Force and the Board of Trustees for the Parliament of World's Religions](#), and Ms. Ludovica Martella, a researcher and reporter on sustainable development and gender, as well as a postgraduate student in sustainable strategies at The New School for Public Engagement, where she is focusing on indigenous rights and ecologies. Martella is not new to TNS as she graduated from Masters of Arts in International Affairs in May of 2018, where she focused on climate governance and human rights. Ms. Martella writes and documents her research and experience on her [blog](#). Other speakers at the event included Scott Hartley, primary school teacher, and an official Soka Gakkai representative from Great Britain.

Each speaker contributed to the conversation through their personal experiences and the human connection we must make through compassion and emotional understanding to collectively adhere to the SDGs. Hartley noted the “lack of deep understanding and missing link” within American and British high school programs, noting that campuses must generate a community-based response through local and individual action in addition to learning the basics of climate change. Hartley stated that sharing the philosophy of Buddhism would impact others and help save our planet. Damodaran spoke on how awareness and concern are fundamental to the understanding of the climate crisis, and how multiple environments must embrace the conversation, whether in a classroom or a group, to develop a deeper understanding, appreciation and emotional connection to climate change. Damodaran noted that young imagination has the power for social good and that the SDGs are basic principles of peace culture. “SDGs are not new or revolutionary,” Damodaran said. “We have known all along.”

Pedersen, as an educator and doctorate in Buddhist studies, made the point that education is the basis and platform to understanding the world around us, and that the youth



of the world can maintain a  
“cosmovision”, or system of ethics  
and values, connected and  
associated with the SDGs and the  
principle philosophy of the United  
Nations.



In her presentation, Martella compared the statistics between all three nations, Japan, US and UK, noting that two out of the three nations showed the most interest in Quality Education, rather than UK for Climate Action: Japan at 49% for Quality Education, the UK at 77% for Climate Action, and the US at 37.8% for Quality Education. Martella

revealed this to be interesting because it shows how people don't realize how the SDGs are impossible to achieve without climate action.

To support her claim, Martella spoke about how severe weather manifestations such as droughts and wildfires are forcing women, the grand majority of the agricultural labor force, to migrate to other countries, often in precarious conditions, with the consequences of putting themselves in danger and separation from their families. "In this case we can see that without proper climate action, the first goal, No Poverty, and the second, Zero Hunger, are out of the question from the start, considering the devastation that climate change repercussions bring to these crops and to the families who depend on them. Furthermore, the third goal, Good Health and Well Being, is also unlikely to be fulfilled considering that these women travel, often by foot, to other crops to find work, which puts their physical and mental health at great risk. Traveling under stressful conditions often puts them in danger of getting loped into human trafficking and prostitution. As a result, Goal 5, Gender Equality, is definitely weakened, as women are set back in their social and economic status due to forced climate migration." This is only a small example of how climate action

is what binds all 17 goals. Therefore, we should be aware of their connections and interdependence when speaking about them, Martella suggested.

This interconnectedness also relates to the discourse that Martella made around defending indigenous peoples' rights and practices. She emphasized how indigenous peoples are the ones who are most connected to the Earth's cry for climate sanity and are, therefore, one of the populations most affected by the climate crisis. Martella suggested that indigenous ecologies hold incredible knowledge to fight the climate crisis and that indigenous knowledge is what nations and people alike must trust and respect, as these ecologies both heal and understand the land in ways Western societies do not.

She suggested that the first step to making this possible is to push our governments to give sovereignty over their land back to the indigenous peoples, who are often unable to practice their curative rituals on the land, including self-sustaining agricultural practices, which are less harmful to the Earth; in contrast to Western crop systems. Martella also emphasized how in urban settings the climate crisis disproportionately affects people of color and Latinx communities, where

poor communities commonly live  
next to toxic waste dump sites and  
polluting energy plants.



Martella also described that academics and activists alike often underestimate both the values and carbon emissions from institutions promoting sustainability, such as universities. This conversation led to a discussion-based exchange, when the audience and speakers split into four groups to discuss how sustainability and climate change can be managed and addressed on school campuses on a global scale, with questions from the panel, including “What are we not doing?”

and “How can we connect SDGs to daily life?”. Hartley found that students too often have a “So what” idea. Meanwhile, other audience members noted that universities should encourage students to focus papers and research projects on their local communities and sustainability efforts with the help and resources of universities through classes, clubs, and curricula that stretch beyond the “So what” attitude. It is important to truly work for change and not just engaging through the subtle curiosity of social media or watching the evening news.

Martella ended the discussion with closing remarks on simple steps to take in order to tackle the climate crisis, including supporting green companies, such as B corporations to be mindful consumers and engaging in conversations around these issues more often. “Keep on engaging in these kinds of conversations, because this is how change happens. Especially around the issues of marginalized groups,” said Martella. “The SDGs really come down to very simple things that we can all do in our lives, so in terms of engaging conversation, instead of making a complex argument of humanity and politics, let’s bring it back down to food production, respecting different genders, individuals, producing equalities for each other, these are actually principles of the indigenous,

it is actually less complicated than it is.”

*Story by: Emily Dosal*



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