



Reimagining the Future of Sustainability at MIT MIT Community Sustainability Forum April 30, 2020

The MIT community has demonstrated remarkable resolve in the face of COVID-19. In order to explore how this experience has impacted the community's perspectives on sustainability, the Sustainability Leadership Committee hosted a Community Sustainability Forum on April 30 in collaboration with the Office of Sustainability, the Environmental Solutions Initiative, Terrascope, and the MIT Energy Initiative. Over 100 participants – students, staff and faculty across the institute – worked in small groups to reflect upon three guiding questions:

- **What parts of the response to COVID-19 are positive and aligned with the principles of sustainability?**
- **What proposals for action on sustainability would we like to bring forward to the MIT community?**
- **How can MIT lead the way?**

The participants in our forum articulated that this experience [COVID-19] has strengthened the sense of community at MIT, created a robust sense of caring and connectivity, and fostered a willingness to innovate and shape a new future. Participants also noted that the experience has demonstrated MIT's ability to make dramatic changes to address global threats, strengthening their belief in the Institute's ability to respond to global-scale sustainability challenges like climate change. One dominant message was an excitement to take advantage of this restart to design and reset with more sustainable practices. There was also a strong sentiment that community well-being and sustainability go hand in hand. Many participants called for greater leadership and boldness by MIT in the area of sustainability.

The feedback from the participants has been organized into five major themes supported by related categories. This feedback calls on MIT to bolster its commitment to the following areas that should guide the next generation of sustainability planning:

- Human health and well-being
- Climate action
- Food security
- Consumption and waste
- Sustainability education
- Bold leadership

HUMAN WELL-BEING

Participants noted that COVID-19 has demonstrated the importance of the well-being of MIT's community members: the sustainability of MIT's efforts in education and research depends upon individuals' safety and health. As the Institute re-opens, we can build upon this renewed awareness of the importance of well-being to explore policies and practices that promote staff, faculty and student welfare. One example mentioned by many participants--with implications for both well-being and the Institute's environmental footprint--is the potential for making it easier for staff to work from home more often after the crisis ends.

On a more global scale, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted inequities that challenge human well-being. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on communities of color echoes the disproportionate impact of climate change, air and water pollution, and other environmental problems on these same communities, demonstrating the tight links between social justice and sustainability. Participants noted the need for a clearer linking of equity and justice with sustainability in MIT's actions, from education to climate action to research.

CLIMATE ACTION

COVID-19 has temporarily reduced the Institute's carbon emissions, including those directly related to on-campus research, those related to employee commutes, and those related to air travel for MIT's educational and research programs. Participants discussed a variety of ways of taking advantage of this pause to reset and potentially lower the carbon intensity of MIT's work. A particular area of interest included tracking and rethinking air travel within the Institute's departments, labs and centers.

More generally, the experience with COVID-19 has provided a powerful example of the potential for the Institute and the broader society to respond rapidly to a global threat. Participants noted that the scale of the climate crisis demands a realignment and refocusing of MIT's actions in all domains, from research to teaching to operations, in a manner similar in scale to the COVID-19 response. Specific areas of focus were in establishing clear net-zero goals for the campus and in developing a robust framework for responsible use of MIT's investment portfolio.

FOOD SECURITY

The COVID-19 crisis has created deep food insecurity in both local and global communities, and it has demonstrated the fragility of international food supply chains. Participants highlighted the importance of promoting food sustainability as we rebuild food systems on campus, but they noted that these efforts need to prioritize food security and resilient supply chains alongside environmental goals. Food production and supply chains are evolving and we will need to engage innovative approaches to food supply, production and distribution on campus, with an increased focus on regional food production.

RETHINKING CONSUMPTION AND WASTE

Participants noted that COVID-19 has disrupted personal consumption patterns, leading many to reconsider their everyday purchases. Similarly, the pandemic has disrupted the Institute's

consumption of materials for research and education. As MIT re-opens, participants questioned what structures could be put in place to enable more sustainable consumption decisions by units and individuals around the Institute.

Participants also noted the way that the pandemic provides an opportunity to rethink supply chains to reduce waste, though there was insufficient time to explore this topic deeply.

Finally, participants noted the increase in waste that will result from the widespread use of disposable products (e.g., PPE, food containers, grocery bags) as the Institute and the broader society re-open, offering an important design challenge to reduce the impact of these single-use products.

SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION

While excellent curricular options exist for students interested in a 'deep dive' into sustainability, participants suggested that sustainability needs to be broadly embedded within MIT's undergraduate curriculum. Some participants suggested the need for a climate or sustainability GIR. Other participants noted the need for clearer signaling by MIT leadership to students that an understanding of sustainability is central to becoming well-educated, and more energetic communication of the value of interdisciplinary expertise in addressing real-world problems.

BOLD LEADERSHIP

Participants noted that the COVID-19 crisis has made clear the importance of leadership at all levels in addressing global challenges. The experience has increased their sense that bold leadership and action are needed from MIT in confronting the climate and ecological crisis, harnessing MIT's power, resources, and reputation to catalyze action toward a safe and sustainable future for all. This leadership would take multiple forms, including clearer signaling to the MIT community of the centrality of sustainability to MIT's research and educational goals, increased translational efforts connecting research findings to their implications for policy, and greater civic engagement by MIT's students and leaders.

TO SOLVE FOR: Questions from the community

Working from home: If we recognize that work-from-home can be done, what are best practices? How does an office function in which some of the staff are working onsite and others online? What are the sustainability impacts of increased working from home?

Commuting: How will people commute to campus in the future? What do we do when people are afraid of taking public transit?

Returning to "normal": What rebound response can we anticipate---little flying now, lots more flying once we all return? How do we moderate these impacts?

Reduction in air travel: Can we innovate remote event management to reduce the need for

long-distance travel and improve opportunities for collaboration and learning from a distance? Can we make a long-term dent in long-distance travel?

Connecting research to policy: How do we incentivize and organize researchers to engage in sustained efforts (e.g., white papers) to inform policy?

Sustainability education: How do we make sustainability and civic engagement more central to MIT students' learning? More specifically, how can these transdisciplinary areas be reflected within disciplinary major tracks?