



Conversation with Thomas Legrand

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me about your background and what brought you to the work that you do?

Thomas Legrand: I'm Thomas Legrand. Sometimes I define myself as a wisdom seeker. I'm a social scientist. I have a PhD in ecological economics. I'm a sustainability professional. I worked with the UN leading the Conscious Food Systems Alliance convened by the United Nations Development Program.

What led me to that work was actually an encounter with native spirituality in Mexico as I was finishing my studies, which led to a deep reconnection to myself, but also to Mother Earth. That's what first led me to work on the environmental agenda and then to bring the inner dimension into that work, as this is what we do with the Conscious Food Systems Alliance. It has also led me to spend 10 years writing a book called *Politics of Being: Wisdom and Science for a New Development Paradigm*, which has been endorsed by many, many leaders. [It's about putting] a wisdom-based approach or spiritual vision into the mainstream conversation on social and political change as well as sustainability.

Ashley Hopkinson: How would you describe CoFSA's work?

Thomas Legrand: Our work with the Conscious Food Systems Alliance, or CoFSA, is really focused on what we call inner capacities for systemic change in the food systems. That is about mindsets, worldviews, values, beliefs, and all the transformative qualities and skills that can be associated. We're all about the inner dimension of change. Of course, this relates to our collective wellbeing. We put a lot of emphasis on the need to cultivate being as part of being effective at doing. We see the importance of self-awareness or of building trust among people, finding ways to convene people that are much more connected and transformative as a way to build trust and collaboration. How we can also bring the element of nonviolent communications, deep listening—all of this is very important for the change we want to see in the world.

Ashley Hopkinson: What for you is the evidence that you're making progress?

Thomas Legrand: When we meet in person, we can see the inspiration, the quality of connection that we are able to create in a very short amount of time. When people feel like they are almost close friends after three days spent together, you really can see that there is something very powerful in that.

We have 400 members. We also have more than 3,000 people that follow or engage with us. We are really looking at making this agenda around inner capacities much more mainstream as a complementary approach to integrate in all the projects that we are doing. We are paying attention to some signs like, for example, we have this big coalition that wants to scale up regenerative agriculture, Regen10, and they have somehow recognized mental models as one of the key aspects of regeneration. To me, that kind of institutional recognition is very important and shows that our message is resonating with a lot of people.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is an insight or a teachable lesson that you've learned from this work that you'd like to share?

Thomas Legrand: A lot of my work in general has led me to pay attention to the human dimension of change and how important it is to change our mindsets or worldviews for the systemic change we want to see. In working on that with CoFSA, what we have learned is, first, the importance of community. A lot of people are isolated when it comes to the inner dimension or even spiritual dimension. Most of us rather leave that at home and many don't bring that into their work.

The importance of bringing these people together to really let them know that they are not alone, that they can find peer support—this makes a lot of sense for many people, and we can share the learnings, the tools, the language. The evidence has been very important. I think if we want to have systemic impact, being able to create community networks and movement is very important.

The second aspect of this work we have learned is the importance of in-person events, because it's hard to communicate the importance of that inner dimension to people who don't already get it.

We have seen that by bringing people into an experience, into an in-person event, even for those people that don't have much background in that kind of inner work, it makes a lot of difference in terms of being able to experience the power and the potential of it.

I remember we had someone at the three-day event, at the end she said, "I've come here with a lot of questions, and I've dropped them and just want to collaborate with you."

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think it will take to demonstrate the value of some of these principles to make them more mainstream?

Thomas Legrand: That element of community building and movement building is very important to be able to come together. The framing is also important, and the capacity to connect different framings, because often the language can be a barrier for people to connect the dots. In my book, I've mapped out different movements and communities that are organized around these higher human values and that are linked to this new paradigm, which I think has to do with being.

They are the systems-change people. They are the people who are more into following nature's principles—people in the field of talking more about empathy, compassion, love, and of course the people in the wellbeing and happiness space, the people in the peace space or the culture of partnership, the mindfulness people. They operate with different narratives, different languages, different wordings, but they are all part of this bigger movement, this bigger shift which is about reimagining our societies away from the bottom line of economic growth towards being or wellbeing. Being able to connect all these different groups with a broader vision is very important to get traction.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you measure progress toward these things? What are the factors that contribute to the success that CoFSA has had?

Thomas Legrand: There are different layers to that. I've mentioned the importance of community building, the importance of being able to meet in person where the connection gets deeper among people. One thing that is important is to empower our members. We have a Conscious Food Systems Leadership Program. We are also starting to support some testing, some interventions of our members, but we're looking for more funding for that. We also want to bring people together in different teams in different regions. We see the use of collaborative circles or even sharing circles are very important for this community-building effort.

We're also looking at the narrative part—all the work that can be done to give a voice to our members on what this means for them in their own context and the importance of interchange for food systems change. We also see the importance of the science, in particular, to show our impact. We know that's not so easy in terms of measurements.

Narratives of change can be also very compelling. People do change more and are more impacted by stories rather than facts. If you see how our world is working, there is often very little science in the way things are done and how people think about it. Harnessing the power of stories is very important

for that kind of cultural change we want to see and the greater recognition of the importance of these inner dimensions.

Ashley Hopkinson: You mentioned that a big part of your book is about paradigm shifting. Do you think our systems are ready for that?

Thomas Legrand: Yes and no. We see our current systems somehow radicalizing themselves, becoming more effective and also more on the defensive and exclusive to the benefits of a few people. At the same time, I see a greater recognition of the importance of cultural change and systemic change.

I think we are moving towards a greater crisis, including breakdowns, which can really be the doors for the breakthrough and bring this discussion and agenda around wellbeing and inner change into the center of much of the work. We are increasingly aware that we really need a paradigmatic change, a systemic change, maybe even a civilizational change. We can't deal with all our problems in silos. I think we're quickly moving closer to that recognition.

Ashley Hopkinson: What challenges do you face in your work? How do you work as a group to overcome those challenges?

Thomas Legrand: We are a very diverse community. Somehow this does not seem to be such a problem. The key for that is to enable people to engage in groups that are very meaningful for what they do. They can be thematic, for example, but they can also be regional or even national in order to foster natural collaborations.

The main challenge that we are facing is funding. Obviously, it's a new field of work, and it has not been on the agenda of many donors yet, but it's quickly evolving. The approach we have taken to address this was to convene a round table this year on inner change for a just and regenerative future, with a focus on food, nature and youth to engage donors and raise the interest for our work.

[It allowed] them to experience in person the kind of work we do. We convened that gathering where I live so that we could spend a day in this mindfulness practice center called Plum Village, which really made a difference in how we engaged in the next few days in a more traditional workshop style, but still with a lot of mindfulness practices. That proved quite effective. It is something we want to keep.

Now we have an established circle of donors, and we want to convene other events, maybe annually, to grow that group. At the end of these three days, these people really felt there was a common basis.

For us to bring other people in the group, we would also need an in-person event so that there is this deep connection as a basis for this work. There's really a strong group feeling.

Ashley Hopkinson: We're all in these silos and changemakers are working in different sectors. How do you encourage more collective wellbeing? What do you think leaders can do to help advance collective wellbeing?

Thomas Legrand: Building a common narrative that weaves together different perspectives is very important. Bringing people together in person makes a lot of difference in terms of how they can engage in a collective work. Then it's about finding the right entry points and the right objectives, what can we achieve together very concretely beyond the general discussions, what specific target objectives we can define and focus our efforts on to develop this work.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you wish people were talking more about? What is missing in these conversations around collective wellbeing whether its food sovereignty or another topic?

Thomas Legrand: Well, the whole purpose of our initiative, CoFSA, is about the recognition of the importance of this inner dimension. This is our focus and what we want to bring as a complementary approach to integrate into all the work we're doing on transforming food systems. Sometimes wellbeing can encompass different agendas. There are some that are deeper than others. To me that relates in particular to how that collective wellbeing vision intersects with that inner development agenda. The Greeks talk about hedonic wellbeing and eudaimonic wellbeing.

Wellbeing can bring people together. We use it as an entry point. We find that sometimes it's better to talk about wellbeing than things that are more complicated around mindsets and cultures. It's a language that is accessible and that draws people in. What I personally want to see is how deep that vision is, and that relates to the importance of that inner dimension, that cultural or consciousness change that we want to see happen.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support—the funding is there, the human resources are there—what is your vision of what you would like to expand?

Thomas Legrand: Regionalization is key. We have a process for that. We have a Conscious Food System Leadership Program that we are offering to regional courts. We want to support people to meet in these circles. We want them to be able to meet in person, and that can be quite costly, especially in regions where people cannot afford to travel and pay for these kinds of events. Then at the end, we want them to have the resources to integrate that dimension into their projects. We want them to be able to access funding for Conscious Food interventions.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is the mission of the leadership program?

Thomas Legrand: One of the main objectives of the program is to introduce people into CoFSA and equip them with the right knowledge and more experience in how to cultivate these transformative qualities and skills. That's our Conscious Food Systems Leadership Program. We offer it in partnership with the Inner Green Deal, and it is structured around the Inner Development Goals, these 23 transformative qualities and skills that are clustered into five themes. We do one session on each theme.

[One is] around being, self-awareness, presence. Another one is about thinking, we all have our own biases and blind spots. How do we deal with those? Another category is around relating, the importance of empathy, compassion, and feeling connected to those we are working with or working for. Collaboration— how can we strengthen that collaboration? That has a lot to do with communication. Finally, action.

We prompt some reflections about how people will bring a conscious food agenda into their organization and projects, so that at the end of this program they have a very concrete idea and embodied experience of what conscious food means, what we are doing in CoFSA that can help them, what tools we have developed, and how they can take that forward into their work.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything I didn't ask you that you would like to share?

Thomas Legrand: Maybe I can end with the book, *Politics of Being: Wisdom and Science for New Development Paradigm*. I spent 10 years working on it, and it's recognized by many leaders in academia but also in the fields of politics, sustainability, and even spiritual leaders as a breakthrough in terms of how to bring that wisdom or spiritual approach into the mainstream conversation. The starting point is that we need a new development paradigm, and if this one is focused on economic goals, there's a reason why the next one should be about being.

I brought together the science of many different fields according to the values and the different communities I've mentioned. All these new paradigms ...narratives and what that means very concretely in terms of public policies and systems in different sectors. It can be very deep, really talking about the need for a cultural evolution, even a spiritual evolution of humanity, but also very concrete in terms of the levers and the entry points in how we organize societies for this agenda.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you so much for your time.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*