Patricia Widener, Associate Professor of Sociology at Florida Atlantic University

United States

Dr. WIDENER: It is imperative that we, all members of a global society, work toward addressing global inequality and meeting global energy and food needs in a manner that is just, that relies on non-toxic, renewable and sustainable production methods, that reduces the world's greenhouse gas emissions, and that involves the increased participation and determination of affected people and local communities.

How can academics have a more powerful influence on the development of practical environmental solutions and improve the likelihood of their being adopted by society at large?

Dr. WIDENER: Social scientists keep calls for equality, justice, and community participation at the center of the issue. It is not that society should adopt new solutions, but that those solutions have included the input of society, and in particular of the intended community. If proposed developments or projects exclude communities, or aggravate existing inequality or promote new inequality between people based on socio-economic status, gender, race or ethnicity, or place of birth or residence, then they may become a problem, rather than the solution.

Given that the public and governmental debates on environmental issues often include discussions about science, technology, and business practices, what do you think is the most constructive path to achieving active working relationships with all members of society?

Dr. WIDENER: One path is to increase the inclusion of affected or intended community members, who contribute their concerns, questions, and solutions to discussions on science, technology, and business. This effort would include answering community questions and concerns before proceeding with a project or practice. An additional, and complementary path, is education. Nations can produce a citizenry who learn and practice, from an early age, the meaning of participatory democracy, ecological well-being, and community resiliency so that they mature into responsible, locally acting, and globally thinking members of a community—in order for them to contribute to and inform discussions on just science, just technology, and just business practices for their time and for the future. Or, nations may not. If we believe that more people are being excluded from contributing to, participating in, or benefitting from such debates, open up the avenues and forums of discussion so that over time more people are accustomed, enabled, and excited to learn the issues and to participate.

What global activity/process/innovation would you put in place immediately to address environmental challenges?

Dr. WIDENER:

1. Stop any new fossil-fuel extraction and production proposals. We are not transitioning while simultaneously granting new fossil-fuel project proposals.
2. Separate the fossil-fuel industry and fossil-fuel money from elected leaders and government agencies around the world.
3. Foster alternative energy science and technology, and producers and suppliers—into the hands of more people and communities, who are working for people and communities, and not solely with profit in mind.
4. Launch public educational campaigns on climate change.
5. Reduce the level of inequality that is experienced within and between nations. By keeping inequality at the front of discussions, we may encourage leaders in science and technology to incorporate solutions that are inclusive and fair.
6. End the production and use of toxins, especially in the production and supply of energy and food.
7. Divest from fossil fuels; invest in non-toxic oil and energy alternatives.

8. Analyze the negative environmental and societal impacts caused by the world's wealthiest people or companies, and hold them to account for those impacts.

BIOGRAPHY

Patricia Widener is an associate professor of sociology at Florida Atlantic University. Her research examines how community and environmental groups respond to oil projects or oil disasters. Using a political economy approach, with regard to oil and the environment, she has studied experiences of conflict, contamination, negotiation, and/or tourism in Ecuador, the United States, and the Philippines. Her current research is in New Zealand, studying arguments for and against new oil projects, including both deep sea and hydraulic fracturing, in a time of climate-change concerns and known oil-related disasters. She is the author of *Oil Injustice: Resisting and Conceding a Pipeline in Ecuador.*