



Conversation with Gus Hagelberg

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Could you introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about how you came to work with Economy for the Common Good?

Gus Hagelberg: My name's Gus Hagelberg. I am originally from Los Angeles, California, but I've lived now in Germany for over 30 years. My family's here. I have two kids, and I also work at the local university.

I've been involved in the ECG movement for almost 10 years now. I heard about it at a local meeting and at our university. It caught my interest, and we started a local chapter here in my town. And since then I've been involved more and more at the international level. I work in what we call the ECG management team. We're six people who try to manage activities at the international level in our federation.

One of the things that caught me at the beginning was that it's a real hands-on approach. It's not just protesting and fighting against something, but it's actually working on a possible future and positive tools that can help us move forward. I've been a peace activist forever, and I've been demonstrating so long in peace marches. I felt that this was more positive and also just felt good. Fighting against something is difficult and draining. Working on something positive that can have a benefit on society and the environment is rewarding.

Ashley Hopkinson: How would you define economy for the common good? What does a good economy for everyone mean?

Gus Hagelberg: For me, social justice and equality play a really important role. One of our biggest struggles in our economies is that we have so much poverty and that people don't have equal chances to succeed in life. A lot of people don't have the possibility for a safe and successful future because of economic factors. That's the core of it for me. We need to create more economic justice in our system, more social justice. At the day-to-day level, I would like to see more personal involvement in employees and companies.

My experience is that a lot of people are disenfranchised or disengaged at their workplace because they feel like the boss is going to tell me what to do and I'm just going to do it. ECG focuses on helping people get empowered and involved at the workplace and help move the business in a positive direction. I also like the idea of more cooperatives and community-owned businesses, where people are part of the business, not just workers but actually part of the ownership of a company. The focus of our vision is creating a better economic system for everybody.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say makes the organization stand out and makes the work distinctive?

Gus Hagelberg: For me, one of the unique things was working together with businesses. Coming from the activist approach, businesses and corporations were the bad guys. A lot of them still are, of course, but here in Germany, they say, like 90% of companies are small and medium-sized businesses. And those are not bad people. It's just normal people running businesses and having a big impact on the economy.

Another thing is that it's non-party affiliated. It's different here in Germany. In the US it's really hard because there are only two parties, and it often seems like you just cannot work with the other party at all. But in Europe, there's a much broader spectrum of parties, and I believe that it's important to work with people who have different political opinions, because we're not going to move forward without building larger majorities of people. So the ECG tries to be non-partisan as much as possible [when] working with companies.

The volunteer base is really amazing. We have hundreds if not thousands of volunteers working all over, mostly in Europe but also in South America, and over a long period of time. It's a sustained thing. So it's really a grassroots, people-powered movement. We don't have a ton of finances, so we really rely on volunteers, and they're working with businesses and governments at the local level. That's really powerful.

Ashley Hopkinson: Could you talk a little bit about the common good balance sheet: how that was created, why it was created, and how it's used within the ECG movement?

Gus Hagelberg: One of the powerful things [about ECG] is that it can be used right now. It's not a vision of a future where someday we could start. We can start now. One of the things is this common good balance sheet. Companies take it and basically examine their business. It can be a business, it can be an organization, it can also be a university; they take a look at their business practices, their investment practices, how they treat employees, how they treat customers, how they work with other corporations, and what kind of products they're producing. It's a 360 degree view of a company. They take the workbook and work through all the chapters and answer all the questions and enter data about the number of employees and call ownership and their supply chain and what efforts they've made toward sustainability reporting. In the end they score themselves. And then every company that wants to get our label has to have an external audit.

It's a pretty long process, and it's not easy. The disadvantage is that it's not quick, but the advantage is that it gets into the nitty-gritty of a company and also [identifies] their weak points. So if they do have poor hiring policies or something, then that will come out and they can't hide it. The idea is that they can't hide their weaknesses.

We really work to prevent greenwashing. The balance sheet [covers] sustainability reporting, but it goes on to social, economic, ethical reporting. And in the end then they get it audited, and now finally, after many years, we've finished our label that companies can put on their products. It's a big step forward for us. Only companies who've done the audit will get the label.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would be some of the markers that would indicate that a business has the potential to score pretty high on the common good balance sheet?

Gus Hagelberg: One thing would be investment. Where is your money coming from? Where do you invest funds, or who do you receive funds from to help fund your business? Are you working with an ethically oriented bank? Is it an investment-owned company? Is there somebody who's investing in your company to make more profit out of it? How are your work practices within the company?

What I've noticed is that we have a lot of smaller companies that are already green oriented or sustainable companies, and they often have people working there who are very excited about the company, but they don't get paid very well because they're doing it for a purpose. That came out in one of the national newspapers here in Germany. It's a leftist newspaper, and they are very popular among more left people. But it came out in the report that the people working there don't get paid

that well. They're working there because they love it and they want to do it, but they don't have the best working conditions. So pay, job security, and investment come out, and then also decision-making structures within the company. If it's totally hierarchical and totally top-down, that would be a poor marker. If you have more group decision-making or attempts to get the employees to help with business decisions in some way, then that would be a plus. That's one of the more controversial things, because people say, well, everybody can't decide about everything in a company. But they can still do a lot to help people engage in the company.

Also the supply chain is looked at. Where do you get your material? What impact on the environment do your supplies have? What kind of companies are your suppliers? That plays a role. What's your impact on society in general? Do you have a negative environmental impact? Are you basically doing something good for society? That of course is not always easy to decide. It can be very subjective. You might have a company that supports a local club or donates money to a local charity, and that would come as a positive mark.

Companies have to be willing to show their weaknesses or else it doesn't make too much sense. It'd be greenwashing if you just hide the bad stuff.

Ashley Hopkinson: How many businesses are using the balance sheet? How has it helped the overall movement?

Gus Hagelberg: Over a thousand companies have done the whole process and gotten the certification, which for us, as a financially small organization, is a lot. And we've gotten a lot of media [coverage] here in Europe, so we can measure how often it comes up on television or in a national newspaper, magazines, radio. Just today I got a message that the Planetary Health Organization published a document [that includes] one of our pioneer companies, and they reported about their usage of the common good [framework], so it can come out in reports like that.

One thing that makes us [unusual] is that we have quite a bit of political recognition. In the state that I live in in Southern Germany, the governing coalition has it in their coalition document that they want to encourage the idea of the ECG. They also spend money, so the local governments here in the state have funding to support the movement. The governments will help fund companies to do the balance sheet. And even at the national level in Germany, there's a strategy paper about new economies that we're in, and there've been quite a few cities across Europe who've adopted the idea of the ECG and want to use it for their city planning. There was one talk from a mayor of a local city town who said she wants to use the ECG framework as a city planning instrument instead of the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals].

I think it's required by cities in Germany that they have to do the SDGs. And she said that she could just map everything in our common good balance sheet onto the SDGs. So by doing our balance sheet, she basically covers all of the points in the SDGs. That was pretty cool. Cologne, the fourth-largest city in Germany, said they support the idea, and they're paying companies to help them do the balance sheet.

Ashley Hopkinson: Could you describe how ECG uses partnerships or collaborations to help with this work?

Gus Hagelberg: I was just talking to a colleague who's doing a European grant proposal, and they're working with another organization in Valencia, Spain. And we worked with a number of chapters of Oxfam together on a grant proposal. And in two months, we're having a big scientific conference in Holland, and we're inviting Doughnut Economics and two or three other new economy organizations to come and talk about how we can better cooperate. At Doughnut Economics, we have pretty close relationships with Kate Raworth. We've produced joint documents with B Lab. We're a member of WEAll [Wellbeing Economy Alliance], and our founder, Christian Felber, is an ambassador.

Sometimes it's hard, too, because each organization has their own agenda and is looking to advance their own goals and get their own financing and publicity. So it's not always so easy to collaborate with other organizations. But I think that the companies that do the balance sheet are in a way partners, and the cities and the universities are also partners. There have been a lot of universities who've worked on this topic. We have a cooperation with the University of Barcelona. We have a shared staff person. He works for the university and for us, and we're sharing information and collaborating in different ways. I'm not sure how other people would see it, but from my perspective, the collaboration with NGOs is not a super big focus.

Also, we just are wrapping up a two-year curriculum program, mostly for K through 12 schools. They've put together a huge curriculum project, documents that teachers can take, and they're helping educate teachers on how to use it. And they're translating that now into Spanish.

Ashley Hopkinson: How have you been able to operate ECG in a non-partisan way? Is there any practice or approach that is helping make that work?

Gus Hagelberg: Basically by really making clear that we are non-partisan. We have had more support from the green parties in Europe, generally. But the conservative parties often do support the idea. It's pretty revolutionary, and it's basically anti-capitalist, but we don't say that at the first moment,

because that would turn off so many people. We approach it more from a business perspective, that we really want to support businesses to move towards a more ethical, sustainable approach. It's a no-brainer. I think a lot of business leaders do want to make products that are helpful for society, and they want to have employees that are happy. It's more the larger corporations or the investor-owned corporations that just want their return on investment. That's all they care about. But there are so many small, medium-sized companies. And our focus is to work with them.

We've had good [relationships with] politicians from all parties, except the far right, we basically say, we're not going to work with you at all. There have been really high-profile examples in the conservative parties, the green parties, and the more social democrat. If you have a conservative politician in some city and then you can use their name, then that's a good selling point. Other conservatives will say, maybe they're not so bad; maybe we should take a look at it.

We're not anti-business. [We're] putting out the message that businesses can be a partner in moving towards economic justice. They're an important partner because they're doing the work. And that's where so many people are working. If we can build up more and more companies that are happy and want to show what they're doing for society and are willing to have good working practices, then that can build up a whole stronger movement. I think conservative politicians can see that's not threatening their worldview.

Ashley Hopkinson: What might be a teachable lesson or insight that you've picked up along the way?

Gus Hagelberg: The non-partisan approach. One thing that we don't do so much is working on specific legislation. In California, I've worked on legislation against fracking, and you work for two years on this one piece of anti-fracking legislation, and then big business comes and pours in money and you're gone. Legislation is super important, but it's a difficult strategy. [We're] looking for more long-lasting things, building up ideas instead of working on one particular issue and one piece of legislation.

One of our successes is that we've continued over more than 10 years and stayed strong. It's not easy to just toss us out the window. I was involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement, and there were these beautiful camps all over the place, a powerful movement. And then the police came in, tore down the tents, and it was gone overnight. It's really easy to just destroy a movement like that. I love seeing the campus protests right now about Palestine, but it's easy for the police to come in and just wipe it out and then it's gone.

I feel like we have worked in ways that are harder to knock down. It's harder to destroy us. Maybe because we're not out on the street. We're more under the surface. That's one of the things that Christian Felber said a while ago: trying to work eye to eye with the powers that be. Going into the boardrooms or the meeting rooms and discussing eye to eye: we are worthy of being heard.

I don't want to put down demonstrations, but when you're out on the street, you're not in the boardroom. You're not looking eye to eye. And it's easier for them to say, there are a bunch of people out on the street and we can just ignore them. Figuring out how to not be ignored is one of the [key] things. If you get political support, not from particular parties, but from governments and from businesses, then it's harder to ignore.

A lot of movements are dependent on the media to have success. We also need media, but we have other ways of influencing and getting out there. Working with companies is not totally dependent on the media, although that's one of the problems in the U.S. : if you don't have any media, nobody knows what you are and nobody has heard of you, so it's harder to get in the door.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you point to as a challenge that you face in this work, and how do you manage it?

Gus Hagelberg: Of course a big challenge is the power of large corporations. And it's harder for us to get a foot in the door there. The challenge is somehow breaking into that world, which is very difficult.

Building majorities is difficult. Getting heard is a challenge. Getting people to understand what we're doing, because it's complicated, this idea of the balance sheet: what does that have to do with social justice and system change? It's not so easy to explain. If you're working on a single issue, it's easier to explain—if you are fighting for the rights of special needs people [for example]—this is what we want, this is what we're demanding. For us it's more abstract.

One other thing is that our organization has a lot of volunteers, and that's an operational struggle, figuring out how to get volunteers engaged and keeping with the work, even if they aren't being paid. But that's not exactly the bigger picture. Getting the message out there and getting more organizations and more businesses to join up, those are challenges. It's a long process. A company needs to take resources, take time, and they need to understand and see the purpose of it.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support—and when I say right support, I mean the money's there, the people are there—what would you like to see expand and move forward or even be replicated when it comes to this work?

Gus Hagelberg: In the European Union there are new sustainability reporting laws, but they're pretty wishy-washy. We've tried to influence European policies, but it's been really hard because we're very small, and we can't afford to get people out there on the ground in the European Parliament. We had very specific demands on how we thought it should be implemented, and we weren't able to get in there because we just didn't have enough resources.

Education is another place. If we had more resources to do more of these curriculum projects, also in higher education, and do more trainings for teachers on these ideas, that would be really cool.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you.

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.*