



## Rebekkah Smith Aldrich

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Climate change has emerged as a significant challenge and threat to global health. How will the library community respond? In this OCLC Distinguished Seminar Series presentation, Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, a co-founder of the Sustainable Libraries Initiative, explores the challenges and opportunities for libraries in the face of climate change and shares how many in our field are already answering the call for leadership on sustainability.

Rebekkah explains how a mindset focused on the triple bottom line definition of sustainability can change how we see the world around us and shape our future decision-making at home and work to ensure a more hopeful future. The presentation focuses on actionable, practical ideas to address climate change and contribute to a future that considers not only climate change mitigation, but also adaptation and justice.

Use this viewing guide to expand your learnings from the presentation. Take notes, reflect, and use the guide to frame discussions you would like to have with colleagues as you develop an action plan.

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**“Climate change is the single greatest threat to global health, a ‘code red for humanity,’ and is this generation’s grandest challenge.”**

– *Sustainability in Libraries: A Call to Action*, American Library Association

In 2019, the American Library Association adopted sustainability as a core value of the profession in acknowledgment of the severe need for collective action on the topic of climate change called for by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

At the time, the latest [IPCC report](#), written and edited by 91 scientists from 40 countries who analyzed more than 6,000 scientific studies, found that the immediate consequences of climate change were far more dire than they had initially predicted,

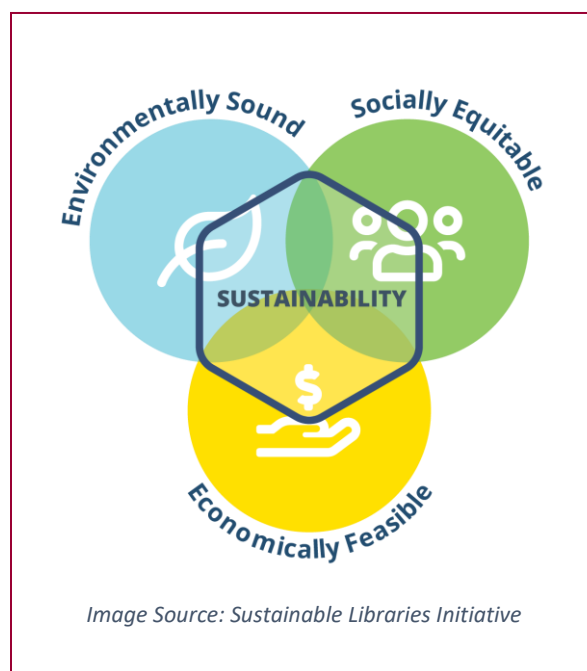
and called for a transformation of the world economy at a speed and scale that has “[no documented historic precedent.](#)” Subsequent reports from the IPCC have had a continued sense of urgency. In 2022, the UN Secretary-General issued a “[code red for humanity.](#)” urging influential leaders to act with more determination on the topic of climate change. Upon issuing the latest [IPCC report](#) in 2023, the chair of the IPCC [Hoesung Lee noted](#), “We are walking when we should be sprinting. The pace and scale of what has been done so far and current plans are insufficient to tackle climate change.”

## The triple bottom line

The Sustainable Libraries Initiative was formed to help library leaders reimagine their work to leverage their influence to help communities be more sustainable, resilient, and regenerative.

Climate change is not just an environmental issue. It is closely tied to our economic choices and has deep roots in issues related to equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice. It is a systemic problem that requires solutions that take into consideration the intersections of our everyday decisions.

To this end, the American Library Association and the Sustainable Libraries Initiative have adopted the “triple bottom line” framework to provide clarity in the desired outcome for a word that is commonly used in many instances. This framework seeks balance at the nexus of environmental stewardship, social equity, and economic feasibility. The framework can be scaled for decisions large and small in a library setting as well as for defining the sustainability of an organization, product, or community.



## REFLECTION

To be truly sustainable, an organization must embody practices that are environmentally sound AND economically feasible AND socially equitable.

**Why are these three practices of sustainability important to a library?**

**Why are these three practices of sustainability important to a community?**

## Four attributes of a sustainable library

According to the Sustainable Libraries Initiative, libraries are sustainable when they are:

- **Strong and authentic institutions**  
This means a library needs to be sustainable “from the inside out.” The Sustainable Libraries Initiative advises libraries to consider first their own policy, operational, personnel, program, service, and partnership design choices using the triple bottom line framework. By building authenticity in our own internal choices, we can be stronger, more reliable allies with like-minded people, agencies, and organizations in our communities.
- **Catalysts for civic participation and social cohesion in communities**  
Libraries must make deliberate choices to assume a nonpartisan role in our communities that encourages a participatory democracy and knits a stronger social fabric. The Sustainable Libraries Initiative urges libraries to embrace the opportunity to actively educate their constituents about how they can be involved in decision-making matters on a local, national, and global scale, while applying the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion to ensure justice is at the heart of decisions made about the future of our communities.
- **Working on climate mitigation (reducing greenhouse gas emissions)**  
Libraries must take responsibility for reducing their carbon footprint and lead by example in our communities. The Sustainable Libraries Initiative provides tools and guidance to help libraries set carbon reduction goals and to deploy strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions caused by library facilities, transportation choices, and food waste decisions.

- **Active participants in climate adaptation (strengthening community resilience)**

Libraries can provide valuable assets that help to build community resilience in the face of disruptive events amplified by climate change. The Sustainable Libraries Initiative encourages libraries to focus not only on disaster preparedness—for example, strategies to help the library resume operations after a severe weather event, an extended power outage, or a disruption such as a cyberattack—but also to contribute to building up a community’s resilience before disruptive events occur. Community resilience work can take many forms, including strengthening the food supply chain, creating redundancies in communication systems, allowing for library infrastructure to become part of emergency management solutions in the form of heating/cooling stations, and serving as resource drop-off/pick-up points.

## REFLECTION

The first of the four attributes of a sustainable library calls upon library leaders to help their institutions be sustainable from the inside out and to live their values out loud.

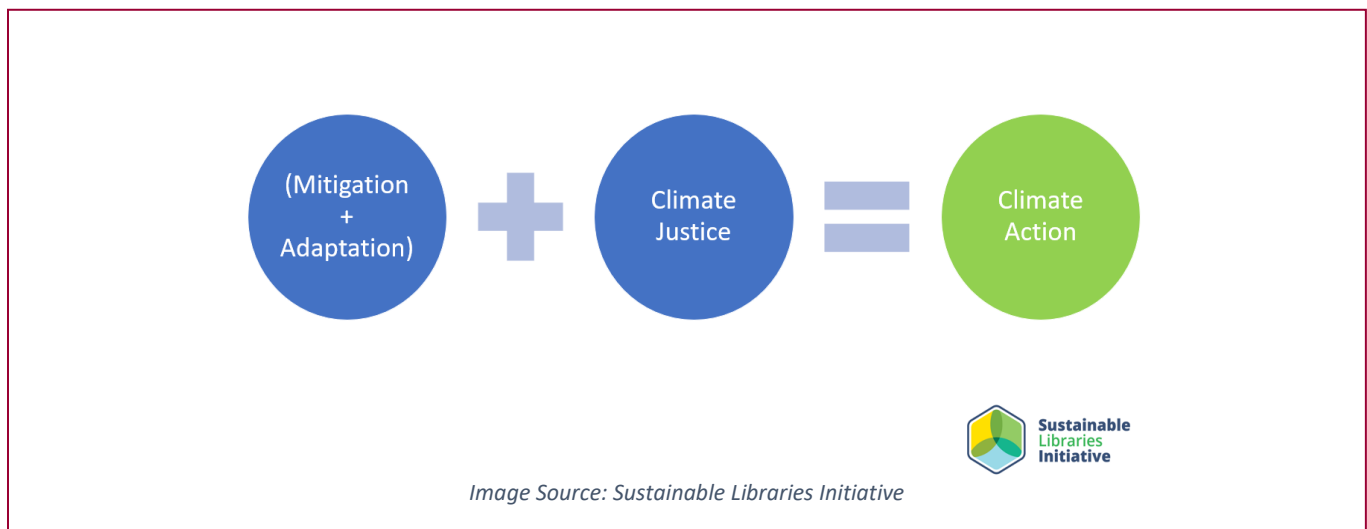
**What are things your organization is already doing that exemplify this attribute? Consider such things as your policies, facility operations, purchasing practices, and service and program design.**

**What could your organization be doing differently to live those values out *louder*?**

## Climate action defined

Climate action is being called for with great urgency, but where to start? The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals create a framework with 17 categories, and the weight of each category can be different from institution to institution and from region to region.

To simplify things, let's start with this formula:



**(Climate Mitigation + Climate Adaptation) + Climate Justice = Climate Action**

Climate action requires attention to both mitigation (reduction of greenhouse gas emissions) and adaptation (strengthening community resilience) while ensuring that justice is served through all future decisions.

The [Center for Climate Justice at the University of California](#) notes that climate justice connects the climate crisis to the social, racial, and environmental issues in which it is deeply entangled. It recognizes the disproportionate impacts of climate change on low-income and BIPOC communities around the world, “the people and places least responsible for the problem.”

Climate action also calls for a rapid, if not radical and disruptive, shift to an economy that is sustainable. However, this shift needs to be a “just transition” to create an economy that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities, and leaving no one behind. The [IPCC](#) defines just transition as follows: “A set of principles, processes and practices that aim to ensure that no people, workers, places, sectors, countries or regions are left behind in the transition from a high-carbon to a low carbon economy.”

In the book *Libraries and Sustainability: Programs and Practices for Community Impact*, the authors explore the extrapolation of the “Doughnut Economics” theory for libraries to think like 21<sup>st</sup>-century economists to cocreate a habitable world centered on our well-being. The authors encourage libraries to model the way to move away from “business as usual” to a transformative economy that is regenerative and distributive by design.

## REFLECTION

Climate action can take many forms, but the most impactful actions are tied to (1) reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and (2) helping communities adapt in the face of the impact of climate change.

**How can your institution reduce its carbon footprint?**

**How can your institution ensure that its workforce is prepared for severe weather events?**

**How can your institution contribute to the resilience of the community it serves?**

## Collective impact

The [Center for the Future of Libraries](#) has identified collective impact as a key trend for libraries to be aware of and participate in:

Complex social issues—hunger, poverty, violence, education, health, public safety, the environment—involve many different factors, and responses to these issues include many different community organizations. Organizations working in isolation and/or individual projects have not significantly addressed or changed many of these issues.

In 2011, John Kania and Mark Kramer published an article in the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) defining collective impact as “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.” The authors propose that projects that use a collective impact model experience large-scale social change from better cross-sector coordination, as opposed to traditional models that leverage isolated intervention by individual organizations.

Through the Sustainable Library Certification Program, the Sustainable Libraries Initiative encourages libraries to form partnerships to amplify climate action in their communities. Repair cafes, community-supported agriculture, and the Library of Things are all ways libraries create opportunities for community members to understand that they are stronger when they work together.

## REFLECTION

Libraries are part of an ecosystem. Identifying like-minded partners and collaborators can be an early step with a big payoff.

**Are there others at your library you can work with to amplify climate action?**

**What existing community partnerships could you build on?**

**Who are the leaders and influencers in your community?**

**Which organizations in your community have similar goals?**

## Next steps: planning for action

List three actions you'll take that will help your library be more sustainable.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

## Resources

### CLIMATE ACTION LITERACY

- [Basics of Climate Change \(U.S. Environmental Protection Agency\)](#)
- [Climate Change Impacts \(National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration\)](#)
- [Environmental Justice \(U.S. Environmental Protection Agency\)](#)
- [U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit](#)

### SUSTAINABLE LIBRARIES INITIATIVE

- [Sustainable Libraries Initiative website](#)
- [eNewsletter](#)
- [Road Map to Sustainability App](#)
- [Presentations from Libraries in the Sustainable Library Certification Program](#)

### SUSTAINABLE LIBRARY CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

- [Sustainable Libraries Certification Program FAQ](#)

### SUSTAINABILITY AND LIBRARIES:

- [American Library Association \(ALA\) and Sustainability](#)
- [Sustainability in Libraries: A Call to Action](#)
- [Resilient Communities: Libraries Respond to Climate Change](#)
- [ALA Sustainability Round Table Resources](#)

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Library Map of the World, Sustainable Development Goal Stories](#), International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)
- [Resources from the Environment, Sustainability and Libraries Section \(ENSULIB\)](#) of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)
- [Resources from the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations \(EBLIDA\)](#)
- [The Green Libraries Manifesto](#), CILIP

### DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

- [Librarian's Disaster Planning and Community Resiliency Guidebook and Workbook](#), New Jersey State Library
- [Disaster Preparation & Planning Resources](#), Australian Library and Information Association
- [Ready.gov](#)
- [Become a Climate Resilience Hub](#)



## FURTHER READING

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