**Transcript:**

Maya: Welcome everyone to our first sustainability podcast! Today we are talking with Daniel Noriega, a management and engineering consultant at the OAS who takes on many roles including that of a sustainability officer. Welcome Daniel to the podcast!

Daniel: Thank you Maya for having me, and hello to all people that will listen to the podcast.

Maya: To start things off, let’s talk about your role at the OAS and the role of sustainability officers more broadly. PADF doesn’t have a sustainability officer but we have some individuals who work on sustainability topics. For those who might not know, what is the role of a sustainability officer and why are they needed at organizations?

Daniel: To begin with a general concept, the mission of the sustainability officer is to understand the organization's metabolism and take the necessary actions to mitigate the organization's impact. So, the role of the sustainability officer is very diverse, and depends on the sector in which it is involved. Cement companies, a US based nonprofit like PADF, and a multilateral like the OAS do not have the same metabolisms.That is important to note.

Maya: Ok, I like this metaphor of metabolism! In a human being, metabolism refers to the process of turning our inputs (like food and water) into energy for our bodies to use. Can you explain a bit more what you mean by an *organization’s* metabolism?

Daniel: Organizations are like living things, and in order for an organization to fulfill its purposes it needs different inputs, such as the energy used by our buildings, the paper used by photocopiers, the fuel used by cars, etc. The sum of all these inputs gives us the consumption of the organization. A standardized way for an organization to measure their metabolism, is to calculate the tons of CO2 emissions that they are generating. Just like with our own bodies, it isn’t healthy to eat poor quality food or to eat too much, it’s about consuming healthy food in a reasonable amount. It’s the same with organizations. There needs to be a healthy amount of consumption to drive metabolism, but not too much because then there is excess waste. Organizations need to be aware of how many tons of CO2 emissions they are generating so they can start to mitigate their impact.

Maya: Great, thank you. That is a great explanation. You’ve just mentioned something I want to touch on: “mitigation of impact.” Can you provide some more details about what mitigation looks like?

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Daniel: You can think of mitigation as the constant monitoring and evaluation of the steps that are being taken to achieve a healthy metabolism. So continuing with our example, is like people deciding how to take care of themselves, taking vacation, going to the gym. This in many ways is the most exciting part of a sustainability officer role. Today we live in a context in which people are highly conscious of the climate crisis; So usually, people have a positive outlook towards the initiatives proposed for mitigation. So the key thing here is to know how to communicate these programs to all staff.

Maya: This is super helpful! So just to summarize, let’s combine the two ideas you’ve mentioned up to this point. First, an organization like PADF has a metabolism created by inputs like electricity, fuel, paper, technology, etc. Second, an organization’s consumption produces waste and we need to monitor that waste and mitigate the CO2 emissions we are creating.

Now, if we can, I’m curious to turn to the bigger picture. The 2015 Paris Agreement made clear that globally we need to remain below 2 degrees celsius, ideally 1.5 degrees celsius of global warming, if we want to prevent the worst disasters of climate change. This summer, the IPCC reported that already in 2020 we have reached 1.1 degrees of global warming since pre-industrialization. That’s pretty clear evidence that we are running out of time to act. Typically, when we think about achieving this goal we think about the role of national governments and their nationally determined contributions to limit CO2 emissions. So given this context, why are sustainability officers needed at nonprofits like PADF and at multilaterals like the OAS when our impact is nowhere close to the national emissions of entire countries?

Daniel: We can see this in different ways. In general, the main reason is that all companies and organizations have a role to play in tackling climate change. The data regarding global warming is definitive in that every degree of prevented warming makes a difference. For that reason, we have the responsibility to adjust organizations to be as sustainable as possible. And the role of the sustainability officer is essential here, because we established the plan that integrates science-based objectives for emissions reduction.

Another reason is more specific, which goes from the standpoint of each individual organization. One of the central pillars of the OAS is the integral development of the countries in the americas, which means that we, as promoters of sustainable development, must start setting an example. What we promote must be consistent with what we do. In that sense, my role is to ensure that our operations and practices are consistent with the mission of achieving sustainable development in the Americas.

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Maya: This is great, thank you, Daniel. Given this context, I agree that every organization has a role to play. At PADF, we believe in creating a hemisphere that is more healthy, peaceful, just, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable for current and future generations. That includes leading by example and making a commitment to mitigate our CO2 emissions. On December 1st PADF formally joined the Climate Accountability in Development Collective which commits us to becoming fully accountable for our emissions by 2025 and reducing our total emissions 30% by 2030. In the grand scheme of things, PADF is at the beginning of our emissions reduction journey and I know we have a lot to learn from the OAS. Would you be able to share what has been the OAS’s journey to reduce emissions?

Daniel: OAS’s mitigation actions can be divided into two areas. The first area are actions where the leadership of the organization is more critical. For example, actions that fall under this area are activities related to energy use and the purchase and maintenance of equipment. The second area of actions are those in which the role of the staff is vital. Examples of this are actions such as recycling, printing, or commuting programs. At the OAS, before asking our staff to take action, we make sure that the organization's overall operations are in line with our emissions reduction goals. In the building we changed to LED lights, installed electric charging stations for vehicles, expanded garage storage for scooters and bicycles, installed roof-top solar panels, and set a goal to have 100% renewable electricity by 2022. As we’ve made these changes, we’ve shared this information with the staff and made them part of the process. And We have received positive feedback and support from people.

Once we were able to show that as an organization we were doing our part, we then started to implement the actions in which the role of the staff is critical. The first step was the "Let's Recycle" program, where personnel learned to separate waste to avoid contamination in recycling. A vital part of the program was the removal of personal desk bins and replacing them with color code bins that separate waste by type at key locations on each floor. This was a big deal for some staff. It required people to change their behavior. Despite some initial concerns, we explained to people in a straightforward way how to adjust, and ultimately we received the support of the staff.

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Maya: Those are really good examples! Thank you for sharing the OAS’s experience with this. What stood out to me was what you said about the importance of bringing all staff into the process. It sounds like it took some effort, but ultimately helping staff recognise the importance of these programs, getting their feedback, and helping them adapt really paid off. What are some lessons you learned through the process of “activating” each person? Can you share what worked well and what didn’t work?

Daniel: One best practice we found was the importance of communication. We needed to make clear to people what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how it affects them. We shared information through a digital flyer and video campaign which was very successful. We also had a special kick-off day, where we set up information booths and went office to office explaining the program and answering questions.

Another best practice we found for getting buy-in across the organization was to work closely with diverse teams such as the facilities and procurement departments. It was important to show them the cost savings that would result from cutting emissions.

In terms of challenges we faced, we fell into a bit of a “honeymoon phase.” At first, things were going really well. We were focusing on the “low hanging fruit” changes that were not that expensive and didn't require too much behavioral change. When the Covid pandemic hit, it paused our composting initiative. But while covid was an unwelcome disruption, it also led to a good pause that allowed us to reflect. In that way the pandemic has shown us new opportunities, for example, from an internal analysis, we were able to identify that it is possible to reduce travel by 35%. This can bring many benefits to the organization, including financial benefits, GHG emission reduction, and improved staff wellbeing.

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Maya: These are some really helpful pointers for any organization and I know this is going to help PADF design our own internal policies. Daniel, thank you, this has been a really fruitful conversation and we are very grateful for your time! Do you have any final suggestions about carrying out successful sustainability work that you’d like to share?

Daniel: My final recommendation is to find an effective way to get people on your side. At the OAS, we launched a Recycling Champions program where we invited staff to volunteer to help sensitize their colleagues to our new recycling program and brainstorming ideas for future sustainability initiatives. We now have a strong group of dedicated Champions who volunteer to take on projects and help us get buy-in across the organization. It takes a little work to organize, but once you get people together, really great things can come out of it.

Maya: I love that idea and I know the perfect podcast episode people can listen to if they want to learn more about successful efforts to mobilize support for suitability projects. It’s titled [“How Amazon Workers Got Serious About Climate (and How You Can, too)”](https://gimletmedia.com/shows/howtosaveaplanet/kwhljz7) by the podcast How to Save a Planet. The link to that episode will be posted alongside the link to this conversation.

Daniel, thank you so much, and on behalf of all PADF, I can say we are very excited to continue working with you and the OAS to become a more sustainable organization.

Daniel: Thank you Maya, it’s been a pleasure and we are happy to have PADF as an ally in these efforts.

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