

Science Climate crisis and fighting unemployment

Ana Isabel Pereira

In early 2021, a newly appointed US President Joe Biden relaunched the country's national and international commitment to the climate agenda and announced the creation of the Civilian Climate Corps, a federally funded initiative aimed at employing tens of thousands of young people to fight climate change. More than a decade earlier, in New York, entrepreneur Lisbeth Shepherd helped found a pioneering project based precisely on that premise: an 'inclusive green economy' could help disadvantaged communities break the cycle of poverty and simultaneously integrate that younger generation in the effort to fight climate change. The researcher, currently at MITdesignX, a program in MIT's (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) School of Architecture and Planning dedicated to innovation and entrepreneurship, was in

Portugal in late March, invited by the Nova School of Business and Economics (Nova SBE), and spoke to PÚBLICO (national newspaper) about the initiative born in 2009, the 'social innovation ecosystem' she found in Lisbon and the possibility of a return to 'get down to business'.

Green City Force (GCF) set out to create a model that would make the promise of an inclusive green economy real for young adults in low-income black communities in New York. The project was incubated by Blue Ridge Labs and the pilot program launched in partnership with several entities, including The Corps Network, the national association that brings together this type of community service initiatives. In 2010, the GCF began recruiting volunteers in partnership with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), which manages the public housing stock in the *Big Apple*.

"There would be a community work component, geared toward career opportunities in the green economy. Focusing on African-American and Latin American youth

who live at the forefront of so many environmental justice issues. We wanted to create a platform for those young people to lead, from which they could learn and develop. The Green City Force was born to make this real', says the entrepreneur, now a consultant for the New York project.

Toward a better future

'Before GCF, I wasn't doing anything. I was simply searching for jobs that would result in just a paycheck with no growth in sight. GCF helped me take a big step toward my future profession as an electrician.' The testimony is from Marcus Mortise, who 'graduated' in 2019, which you can read on GCF's *website*.

The project has '700 graduates' to date, who, like Marcus, after going through a six to eight-month full-time experience, have found employment or created their own jobs in the areas of 'solar energy, energy efficiency, building operations and maintenance,

composting, recycling, landscape architecture, urban farming, green building'. 'Some were the first people of color to enter these businesses', Lisbeth stresses.

Some found employment through partner entities, other found an outlet at GCF, like Joshua Owens. On the project's Instagram, he writes: 'The best part of my job, I would say, is being part of leading forces that promote environmental change through a *cluster* of areas in our social enterprise: energy efficiency, urban forestry, and health and safety. Having the ability to support, as an opinion leader, has been very important to me. Not just grabbing the opportunities that come my way, but planning what makes sense for us as an organization and for the careers of our *alumni* in the future'.

Unsure of 'where those jobs were' - 'five or six years ago there was a great expectation for jobs around solar energy, and that didn't materialize, for example', the strategy was

to help people 'recover, redirect their training' toward other outlets.

What about the environment? 'At the heart of the GCF model is the creation of large urban vegetable gardens with raised beds in the middle of housing developments, which are designed as ecological and resilient *hubs*. These teams of young people design and build the vegetable gardens (there are already six), turn them productive, then other young people come, keep them and expand the activity. The products that come out of these vegetable gardens are distributed to the residents in exchange for the delivery of their compost. This was more or less suspended during the pandemic, but before that, when it was fully functioning, composting in those neighborhoods rose to levels that were seen in more privileged communities'.

'The current challenge is how do we open this up to more people? This happens with collaborations and public-private partnerships. And that is, in part, what brought me to Nova.' That and the connection to Anne-Laure Fayard, professor and researcher in the field of social innovation and coordinator of the new

'The people closest to the problems have the best solutions'

Environment

It is one of the current discussions in the US, but in 2009 New York saw the birth of a project that already linked the environment to unemployment. Lisbeth Shepherd, co-founder of the Green City Force, was in Lisbon where she may replicate the concept of an inclusive green economy





Chair (ERA - European Research Area), a chair funded by the European Union and the idea of which is to develop a social innovation research center. Anne-Laure Fayard did research work on the GCF and helped the GCF leadership realize that what they were doing then was *design thinking*, even if they didn't call it that.

If Lisbon wants

Officially, Lisbeth and Anne-Laure began collaborating in 'June 2018', in a *design thinking workshop*. It was Anne-Claire Pache who joined them. This social innovation specialist, who was at the time at New York University, like Anne-Laure, had founded Unis-Cité in 1994 with Lisbeth. That project and ten years' experience in France launched Lisbeth's career and inspired GCF. The reunion in New York brought Lisbeth to Lisbon. 'For a little over two years, we conducted interviews with all the partners. I then spent some time working with GCF

mapping their experience. And for three months I followed two teams weekly. It changed many of my perceptions', explains Anne-Laure Fayard.

All three now have 'an article under review in an academic journal'. This history of collaboration led Anne-Laure, who arrived at Nova SBE in September and is still designing the chair's strategy, to invite Lisbeth to debut the Social Innovators in Residence program, which is expected to host four entrepreneurs a year, two in the spring and two in the fall, between foreigners and innovators based in Portugal. And, during the interview that the two had with PÚBLICO, a second invitation was registered: for Lisbeth to join the future Advisory Board of the new Chair of Social Innovation, which will be joined in the fall by Assistant Professors Alison Holm and Paolo Leone.

Inside the Faculty, Lisbeth learned about the Leadership For Impact center and the Inclusive Community Forum initiative. In the city, she visited Impact Hub Lisbon and the Largo Residências project and made a presentation

at Casa do Impacto. She liked what she saw and that she found 'something powerful in what already exists, like Portugal Inovação Social'. 'As I understood, it is the first in Europe', she hailed.

The issue of resources came up at every interaction. 'And it's so important, that I ask about it right away. My entire career has been made possible by a grant, from Echoing Green, which in 1993 was of USD 15,000. It didn't just allow me to get started, at Unis-Cité, it allowed me to sow the seeds of what I would do later. At Green City Force I was also a grantee, through the Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation.'

In one week, she says she realized 'that there is immense potential and momentum in Portugal', that 'the country's long history and the diversity of its people are enormous assets', as well as 'the creativity and care', which she understood to be part of our culture. And, of course, 'the focus on the environment in recent years'. The opportunity now 'is to bring it all together, to think holistically', says Lisbeth, who is willing and available to come back and help create an initiative similar to or inspired by the GCF.

'If the city of Lisbon decides that one day it wants to create a Climate Corps, or if people from organizations aligned with this idea feel that this is the time and they develop into a network, I will be delighted to come back and participate in that collaboration in any way I can. And I am sure I will have a lot to learn. I would love to return if we realize that in the future there is momentum around this kind of idea, which we are working on.'

Unemployed youth

Lisbeth returned the idea at Unis-Cité, which she founded with Anne-Claire Pache but also with Marie Trelle-Kane and Julie Chenot. And when she got back to the US, she had the opportunity to join 'a very exciting movement around the [then] emerging green economy'. Both Unis-Cité and Green City Force were born because someone believed in them and gave them a grant, as she emphasized in her meetings with professors and students from Nova SBE and several social innovation projects in Lisbon.

DANIEL ROCHA

Lisbeth says that the efforts of collectives like GCF have not always 'been funded as they should be', but she says that in the US 'there is a long tradition of environmental justice' and she looks forward to the change promised by Biden. 'There is an incredible momentum, which incorporates environmental justice into many agencies. It is true at federal, state and local level. As far as public policy is concerned, there has been a big change. It's not that there was resistance against the GCF, but it's an ambitious endeavor what we've been trying to do. According to the assessment of NYCHA, the landlord to 500,000 people in New York City - it's a very large system, 70% of 18-25 years old youth was unemployed before the pandemic. It is a huge number. And that is a big issue. And then there are environmental-related issues: the old housing stock, the resulting energy inefficiency, health and safety, the poor maintenance state of the houses.'

The GCF model was born within AmeriCorps, a nationwide network of volunteer programs established during the Clinton administration and involving 'between 75,000 and 100,000 people annually'. It was in this ecosystem that Democrats Edward J. Markey and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez advocated operationalizing the Civilian Climate Corps of the American Green New Deal. 'What was proposed [in this new deal] has great support from citizens, regardless of which party they vote for. And it's a much bigger version of what we do at GCF.'

A version that reminds many Americans of a program called Civilian Conservation Corps. Advocated by Franklin D. Roosevelt as a tool to get out of the Great Depression crisis, it ran from 1933 to 1942 and got millions of young people to work all over the country. The New York project already 'has sister organizations in almost every city' in that broader network to which it belongs, The Corps Network. And Lisbeth is now directly connected to the city of Boston, since the research she is starting will have its fieldwork in the capital of the US state of Massachusetts.

And that work, for now at MITDesignX and in Boston, seeks precisely to understand whether it is possible to move from 'a specific program model [like the GCF] to a broader idea'. 'The people closest to the problems have the best solutions', but the model for uniting and mobilizing them can be exported. Can it? 'We need to work locally, but imagine how that can give rise to a real system that transforms [territories and lives].'

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co-founder of Green City Force

