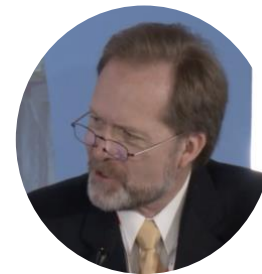




## WAITRO Webinar: The WAITRO SDG-Impact Poster Competition

### Introduction: Paul Burrows, Secretary General of WAITRO and Vice President of JITRI.

Paul Burrows, Secretary General of WAITRO and Vice President of JITRI, hosted the webinar and gave a brief introduction to WAITRO before summarizing the background and goals of the event. Originating at the WAITRO Summit 2022, held in Cape Town, South Africa, the SDG-Impact Poster Competition aimed to highlight work that individuals or teams from WAITRO member organizations consider to have the greatest impact on the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs).



At the Summit 2022, attendees considered the poster exhibition a great success and it served to nucleate new partnerships as well as spread awareness of members' capabilities. The judging panel, however, mentioned that few of the presented projects would be considered "investor ready." In hindsight, this made complete sense because WAITRO's membership, primarily research and technology organizations (RTOs), make the bulk of their living from relatively early-stage, technology-driven projects.

Achieving sustainability and protecting nature on a global scale, as Jean-Marc Champagne will later point out, requires an investment measured in trillions of dollars. This challenge dwarfs the size of government research and international development budgets. Private capital, however, is orders of magnitude larger and could have a potentially huge impact but requires appealing to investors who are looking for a return on capital as well as doing the right thing. To access it, RTOs need to move some projects closer to investor readiness, applying systems-level planning and a customer-focused approach.

This all leads into the WAITRO Summit 2024 with its revised focus on "Innovation to Impact" and a new generation of the SDG-Impact Poster Award. This webinar will feature three presentations from investment and technology transfer experts on what is missing from typical RTO projects. Armed with this information, participants in the WAITRO Summit 2024 are challenged to submit their most impactful projects as poster presentations with an emphasis on a roadmap to investor readiness. The Summit audience will select finalists, who will deliver a rapid pitch to the expert panel, with winners being recognized with a cash award but, more importantly, with ongoing mentoring from a WAITRO-affiliated incubator to help realize their roadmap. The deadline for poster submission is September 30<sup>th</sup> 2024 and details of the process are available on the WAITRO website at <https://waitro.org/programs-services/waitro-summit-2024-sdg-impact-award/>.



## The Speakers

### **Jean-Marc Champagne, Managing Director of Seneca Impact Advisors, Hong Kong SAR, China.**

Jean-Marc emphasized the importance of integrating environmental sustainability into business strategies. Indeed, many of the risks to sustainability facing the world are closely related to the environment. The world economic forum (WEF), for example, makes an annual global risk perception survey and, out of the top ten risks, five of them are directly related to the environment and another two are significantly coupled.



According to the UN Trade and Development, there is a [\\$2.5 trillion funding gap](#) and a lot of what does get funded turns out to have negative impacts on the environment. This seems a huge gap to fill if we only look at traditional sources of governmental funding and international development assistance, but it pales into insignificance compared to the size of the global public equities and private debt markets. Accessing this type of funding, however, requires RTOs to change their thinking about projects and prepare what we call “bankable projects.” Bankable projects are financed by capital that is looking for a return on investment and, just as importantly, the ability to scale to become *big* projects. Otherwise, it’s just not worth bothering with. This type of investor lacks the time to support projects and businesses if they cannot be scaled.

Understanding business fundamentals is crucial for long-term success and attracting investors. This presentation focused on the concept of investor readiness, encouraging companies to adopt scenario thinking to prepare for various potential outcomes. By involving stakeholders in the planning process, businesses can create a holistic approach to project development that aligns with sustainable practices. Jean-Marc's insights underscored the need for companies to shift their mindset from merely seeking grants to developing commercially viable projects that can sustain themselves over time. Impact investing, compared to other investment types, is investing with intent or with purpose

Bankable projects also typically require blended finance, where seed funding might be in the form of grants and scale-up funds then come from corporate sources. In order to succeed, the project must be positively impactful in terms of well-defined, measurable metrics, and will need an experienced project owner to launch the business or an external CEO to run it.

By involving stakeholders in the planning process, businesses can create a holistic approach to project development that aligns with sustainable practices. It will also need support from partners and key stakeholders, with connections to government or investment partners, to come up with a comprehensive business plan including the capital requirements to get to a point where the project is investment ready. Investment partners may even pay a premium for projects, businesses or investments that have a real demonstrable impact on sustainability.



Examples of bankable projects include insect farming in Vietnam, and sustainable coffee growing under the forest canopy in Laos. Jean Marc's insights underscored the need for RTOs to shift their mindset from merely seeking grants to developing commercially viable projects that can sustain themselves over time.

### **James Devitt, Head of Corporate Policy in the Research Innovation and Knowledge Exchange at the University of Huddersfield, UK.**

The recent WAITRO Summit 2022 in Cape Town underscored the transformative potential of systems thinking in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). The event brought together experts, researchers, and stakeholders to explore how integrated, holistic approaches can enhance the sustainability and scalability of development projects.



For the WAITRO Summit 2024, James focused on the value of a holistic approach to project management; systems-level thinking emphasizes understanding the interconnectedness of various components within a system. Unlike traditional linear methods, this approach considers economic, social, environmental, and cultural factors, aiming for a comprehensive evaluation of project impacts.

He emphasized that true sustainability extends beyond environmental considerations, encompassing project longevity, scalability, and self-sustaining momentum. Addressing the complexities of a problem holistically increases the likelihood of creating projects that attract investment and endure over time.

Systems-level thinking also fosters innovation by identifying leverage points and facilitating stakeholder alignment. This approach ensures that projects are not only feasible but also viable in the long term, thereby enhancing their investment potential. Many projects, while claiming sustainable outcomes, are often unsustainable in design. The workshop on SDG17 at the WAITRO Summit 2022 therefore advocated for a shift towards systems thinking to overcome these inherent flaws.

The University of Huddersfield's [collaboration with institutions such as Kibabii University](#) in Kenya, catalyzed through WAITRO, exemplifies the success of systems thinking. Projects like turning waste into energy have demonstrated significant positive impacts on local communities and the environment, illustrating the practical benefits of this approach. To support the adoption of systems thinking, the workshop at the WAITRO Summit 2022 introduced various tools and methodologies, including the Systems Thinking Playbook, causal loop diagrams, and scenario planning techniques. These resources help practitioners visualize ecosystems, understand dynamic interactions, and engage stakeholders effectively.

In conclusion, systems-level thinking is important for fostering sustainable innovation. By adopting this approach, researchers and practitioners can create more resilient, scalable, and



impactful development projects, aligning with WAITRO's mission to advance global sustainability through collaborative research and innovation.

### **Wesley Okeke, Chief Executive Officer of Headway Idea Labs and CUBIO Innovation Hub, USA.**

Wesley Okeke shared his extensive experience in business development and innovation. He discussed the importance of human-centered design in transforming ideas into successful market launches and how the team is the most important part of the proposal in the eyes of investors. Indeed, a mediocre idea supported by an excellent team stands much more chance of success than an exceptional idea supported by a mediocre team.



Understanding market dynamics and consumer needs is essential for developing viable products and services. Wesley highlighted the role of innovation hubs in fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing among entrepreneurs and organizations. Furthermore, a successful solution is likely to be one that addresses a problem or pain point, rather than a *symptom* of a larger problem. In the latter case, the root problem may change or disappear, eliminating the market without warning.

It is important to focus on a clear process to navigate the complexities of product development and market entry. Project leaders should be encouraged to leverage their unique insights and experiences to drive innovation and create impactful solutions. Part of that is understanding the value proposition that you are creating and providing. If this is not clearly articulated, then you will have a very difficult time connecting it to a cost or a price, and also difficulty in making money or impact. Entrepreneurs should also consider using beta customers and early adopters early on to get feedback that can help to further develop the product, rather than trying to develop a perfect solution in isolation and then marketing to customers.

Wesley concluded by reinforcing the idea that successful innovation requires a commitment to understanding and addressing the needs of the target audience, ultimately leading to sustainable business practices.

### **Summary**

This event kicked off the WAITRO Summit 2024 that will culminate in three days of discussion, partnership, and innovation in Nanjing, China at JITRI, host of the WAITRO Secretariat, on November 13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> 2024. Early bird registration rates are available until September 15<sup>th</sup> 2024



on the Summit website at [www.waitrosummit2024.org](http://www.waitrosummit2024.org) and a full recording of the kickoff webinar, including the slides and discussion, is available now on the WAITRO YouTube channel at <https://youtu.be/lrZMRr29F8s>. Any questions can be directed to the WAITRO Secretariat at [info@waitro.org](mailto:info@waitro.org) or see the articles on the WAITRO website or LinkedIn page. We hope to see you in Nanjing!