by Saul Klein

The Victoria Forum: Developing Ideas for a Better World

The Victoria Forum is a broad initiative to develop solutions to global challenges through dialogue and collaboration. It convenes academics, policymakers, business leaders, Indigenous communities, and civil society to address the trust crisis and build a more prosperous and harmonious future. It is co-hosted by the University of Victoria and the Senate of Canada.

Founded in the Gustavson School of Business, the Forum reflects the School's commitment to social change and advocacy of business as a force for good. It builds on initiatives such as the Gustavson Brand Trust Index and programmes designed for Indigenous communities to make a difference in the world.

IDEAS

Empathy is not a weakness - it's our only hope

In a world marked by deepening divides, whether political, economic or ecological, empathy should be recognised as essential to our shared future. We are witnessing the rise of leaders and influencers who see empathy not as a virtue, but as a vulnerability, something to shed in their pursuit of dominance.

For a long time, we believed that our systems just needed fixing, that they were broken or outdated. But we've come to realise something more unsettling. These systems are not broken. Their negative outcomes are not bugs. They are features of the way they were designed. And they are producing exactly what they were incentivised to produce — environmental degradation, exclusion, concentration of wealth, and structural inequality.

What is lacking is empathy; the humility to listen, the courage to act for the common good, and the ability to know what it is like to walk in another person's shoes. Empathy, when made actionable, can move beyond sentiment and become a powerful tool for bridge building, renewal, and systems change.

Genesis of the Victoria Forum

Following the appointment of a Canadian diplomat as an adjunct professor in the school in 2017, the idea of putting on a small workshop to mark Canada's 150th anniversary was proposed. Growing out of a concern that our world was becoming increasingly divided with the growth of populism, protectionism and xenophobia, it was decided to showcase Canada as an example of a country that has succeeded by being open to trade, investment and migration. The first Forum attracted over 500 participants. Some key principles that later became embedded in the Victoria Forum were established at that time, including a focus on solutions rather than problems, evidence-based dialogues, non-partisan discussions and partnerships with a wide range of organisations.

The initial Victoria Forum was held as a partnership between the University of Victoria and Global Affairs Canada, run out of and managed by the Gustavson School of Business. Other partners included foundations, think-tanks,

non-profit organisations and private sector companies. Keynote speakers included two former Prime Ministers of Canada and the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

PARTNERS

Accelerating Community Energy Transformation (ACET)

Partnering with the Victoria Forum since 2024, ACET is a multi-partner international initiative, accelerating the global push for resilient and equitable clean energy solutions through local, community-based collaborations. ACET's goal to advance cross-sector collaboration for climate and energy action rooted in equity and place-based knowledge makes the Victoria Forum a key strategic partner to mobilise knowledge, inspire action, and surface new research and policy roadmaps to crowd-in capital for just transitions.

Development

Our work is structured around three major, and often overlapping, themes, reflecting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals:

1. **Regenerative Economy**

To reach the SDGs, the global economy must make significant new investments in ecosystem resiliency and social wellbeing. The Victoria Forum develops and promotes the emerging principles and practices of regenerative economics, bringing together local, national and global leaders from the fields of impact finance and systems innovation.

2. **Equity and Social Justice**

At the heart of the divides we are seeing in the world are perceptions of unfairness and inequity. Building trust is necessary for healthy societies and requires that we pay greater attention to ensuring equity and justice for all.

3. **Peace and Democracy**

At a macro level, we are seeing the destruction of our social fabric and increasing attacks on our democracy. Whether through the rise of populism or escalating superpower conflict, our world is fragmenting, and trust in our core institutions is eroding. The Victoria Forum is committed to bringing people with different perspectives and backgrounds together to develop solutions to these challenges.

To date, we have held five major events in Victoria (including an online one), four smaller workshops in Ottawa and two in London, as well as a series of webinars. We partner directly with a broad range of other organisations with complementary interests, to both develop our agenda and work towards implementing the recommendations that flow from our discussions. Following each Forum, we prepare and disseminate a report summarising recommendations that arise from our discussions. We solicit input and feedback from participants and aim to build a community of practice around our themes. Organisationally, we have spun off from the University into a separately incorporated non-profit organisation.

INITIATIVES

The Lekwungen Sport Declaration

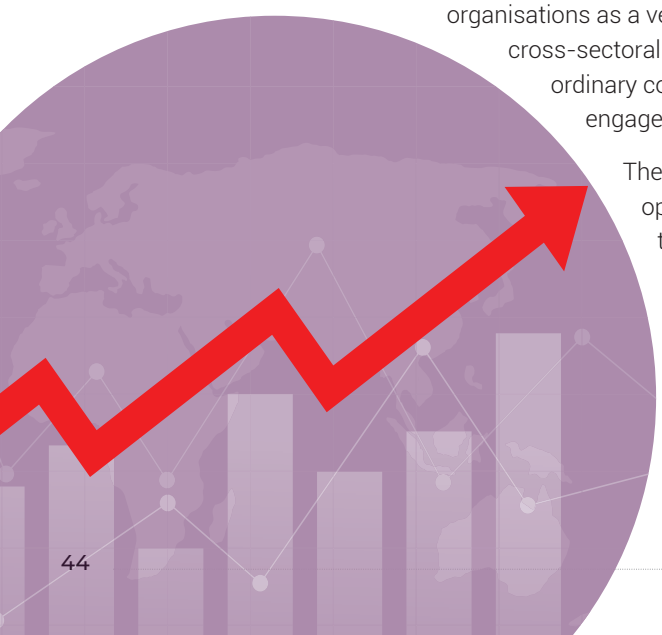
Developed in collaboration with the Commonwealth Games Federation, this declaration was finalised at Victoria Forum 2022. It is a global initiative that promotes reconciliation and partnership with Indigenous peoples in sport. Adopted by the Commonwealth Games Federation in 2023, it includes 10 calls to action to increase Indigenous participation, address barriers, and develop tailored sports programmes through collaboration and a shared commitment to reconciliation. The name "Lekwungen" comes from the traditional territory of the Esquimalt and Songhees First Nations, where the declaration was developed.

Building on Past Forums

The Victoria Forum has developed a strong legacy of action-oriented dialogue. Each Forum has sought to create pathways for a better world:

- **2017** – 'Canada @ 150: Promoting Diversity and Inclusion'
- **2020** – 'Bridging Divides in the Wake of a Global Pandemic'
- **2022** – 'Bridging Divides: Turf, Truth & Trust'
- **2024** – 'Building Trust for a Shared Future'
- **2025** – 'Towards a Better Future: Shifting the Trajectory'

The 2025 Forum attracted over 600 participants in person for the event, along with many others online. It included 226 speakers in 48 different plenary and parallel sessions. We are seeing the Forum being used by our partner organisations as a venue to convene important, cross-sectoral conversations. This is no ordinary conference, but a true forum for engagement.



The Victoria Forum creates opportunities to explore the complex tapestry of challenges facing our world and search for solutions to them. While the threats we face are indeed stark, they also present opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and the rebuilding of trust. Only by addressing the current trust crisis can we pave the way for a future that is not just shared but also prosperous and harmonious. In doing so, Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being provide valuable insights.

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GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

The Casablanca Round

In February 2025, in partnership with ESCA Ecole de Management, we offered our first international forum - A Better Africa for All: Building Trust and Empowering People.

This inaugural event in Africa brought together leaders, innovators, and visionaries to tackle the continent's most pressing challenges and opportunities. With a focus on empowering youth, fostering trust, and promoting sustainable development the Forum aims to shape a better **future for Africa.**

Conclusions and Reflections

The Victoria Forum was established with the belief that business and business schools can and must play a greater role in addressing the social, economic and environmental challenges of our times. It is not enough to limit the damage that our activities are causing -- we must change the way we operate to make a net-positive difference. Business schools have expertise, credibility and convening power and we have a responsibility to bring these together for social good, not simply to advance the narrow, short-term interest of our corporate stakeholders.

The Victoria Forum demonstrates both what is possible and what more still needs to be done to build a better future. We have been received very positively by a wide cross-section of society and have been able to bring together change-makers from diverse sectors. We have been able to attract financial support from foundations, corporations and government bodies interested in supporting our work out of a shared sense of purpose.

At the same time, we see the challenges facing the world in increasingly stark terms, whether in the rise of autocracy and the erosion of democracy, the looming threats of climate change or the destruction of our social fabric. It is incumbent on business schools that are training the next generation of leaders to ensure that different models of behaviour are presented and a broader sense of responsibility is inculcated. We have been complicit in driving a narrow shareholder view of capitalism in our teaching and our research, and must redress the imbalances that have resulted.

We invite you to join us on this journey. For ongoing information on our activities, please visit www.victoriaforum.ca.

About the author

Saul Klein, is Professor and Former Dean, Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria; Executive Director, Victoria Forum.