

REGENERATIVE DESIGN:

Applying Circular Strategies to a Sustainable Agriculture Organization's Impact Report

Paula Welling / Systems Thinking—Fall 2022



Image: Daniel Fazio / Unsplash



Image: Mika Baumeister / Unsplash

Context:

I work as a freelance graphic designer. I recently received a project inquiry from a sustainable agriculture nonprofit for a multi-page printed impact report to share with potential donors.

Challenge:

Print design can create significant impacts via paper, ink, printing and shipping, and waste. How can I apply circular strategies to ensure that the report aligns with and amplifies the organization's values? Can I envision what a report looks like and still meet the client's goals?

Further Application:

I receive many requests for print projects. I'd like to better understand how I can meet my clients' needs in an eco-effective way.

System and Super-Systems

SYSTEM

The system I'm working within is my own design process, specifically for this sustainable agriculture organization's impact report.

Boundary: The boundary is the scope of the project—needs and goals, budget, and timeline.

Inputs: Insights and feedback from client, insights and resources from the sustainable design community, budget, materials and energy used in production

Outputs: Waste from production processes, final deliverables, waste from deliverables at end of life

Purpose: Accomplish client goals

SUPER-SYSTEMS

My design process interacts with several larger systems, and this specific project will impact many systems, as well:

- The sustainable agriculture organization, including their network of local/regional farmers
- Printing and manufacturing systems
- Timber and paper industries
- Waste management and recycling systems
- Natural systems, including forests, composting processes, and earth's climate
- Human health

APPLYING CIRCULAR STRATEGIES

Product as a Service

Can we reenvision what a report looks like?

During an initial meeting, my contact at the organization told me that the goal for this report is to solicit donations from key potential donors. In most cases, representatives from the organization will share the report with donors during in-person conversations, and they'll mail a smaller number of reports.

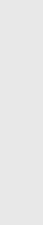
It occurred to me that the **interaction is the key**, not the report. The org does need a compelling way to share their story with clients, but does it need to be a printed report?

With that focus in mind, a **relationship-building solution** could include:

- A **presentation** that can be shared in-person or sent to a donor. This could be a compelling, interactive microsite. While digital products do create impact, offsets for hosting can be purchased.
- A **small, meaningful gift** that donors can take away or that can be mailed. What about a packet of seeds purchased from farmers in their program? Then, the org would even be supporting their own network of farmers via this project.

instead of

Print Report



*focus on relationship-building
and supporting farmers*

Presentation

+

Seed Packet Gift

with seeds from local farmers in the program

APPLYING CIRCULAR STRATEGIES

Smart Material Choices

The organization emphasized that they want a gift for their donors (initially envisioned as a pull-out poster inside the printed report). If that gift were a seed packet instead, how can I design the packet in an eco-effective way?

I need to learn much more about sustainable printing and production. But, some potential strategies include:

- Unbleached, fully compostable paper
- Eliminate adhesive or find a non-toxic option
- Non-toxic inks, potentially algae ink, and minimize ink coverage
- Design for the sheet size to minimize paper waste

The goal is to find a solution that is **fully non-toxic and compostable**—so that the packet can contribute to the creation of healthy soil.



Patagonia guide to Boulder, printed on unbleached paper with algae ink (via The Office of Ordinary Things)

Systems Impacts

The shift away from a print report would impact the systems surrounding this project in several ways:

NETWORK OF LOCAL/REGIONAL FARMERS

Supporting Local Farmers

Instead of using their budget to print a multi-page report, the organization could use that money to purchase seeds for the gift seed packets directly from farmers in their network. In doing this, they would directly support farmers who are using sustainable practices, as well as local/regional food systems more broadly.

WASTE, HUMAN HEALTH, NATURAL SYSTEMS

Eliminating or Reducing Negative Production Impacts

Creating a presentation or website would eliminate impacts from printing a multi-page report—including human health impacts from potentially toxic inks, ecosystem impacts from timber production, and impacts eventually created by recycling, landfilling, or incinerating the reports. While creating the microsite or digital presentation and producing the seed packet envelopes would create impacts, those impacts can be offset and/or eliminated by intelligent materials choices.

NATURAL SYSTEMS

Returning Materials to Biological Systems

Composting the non-toxic seed packets at end of life helps build healthy soil, even in a small way, and returns materials to biological systems.

Regenerative Principles

I was most inspired by the idea of value-adding roles while exploring this topic.

As designers, we can take two approaches: We can simply create whatever deliverable our client requests, or we can work above the project level to help our clients envision broader, more innovative solutions.

In this specific case, I could accept my client's request at face value and simply create a print report. But, by asking the right questions and helping my client move away from end-state thinking, I can instead work with them to envision a solution that actually embodies the spirit of their organization by deepening connections with farmers and supporting healthy soil and ecosystems.

This way of thinking isn't entirely new to me as a designer, but I hadn't quite realized just how central it is to creating eco-effective designs—designs that do more than simply use “less bad” materials. I'm excited to continue exploring its potential in my process and my work.

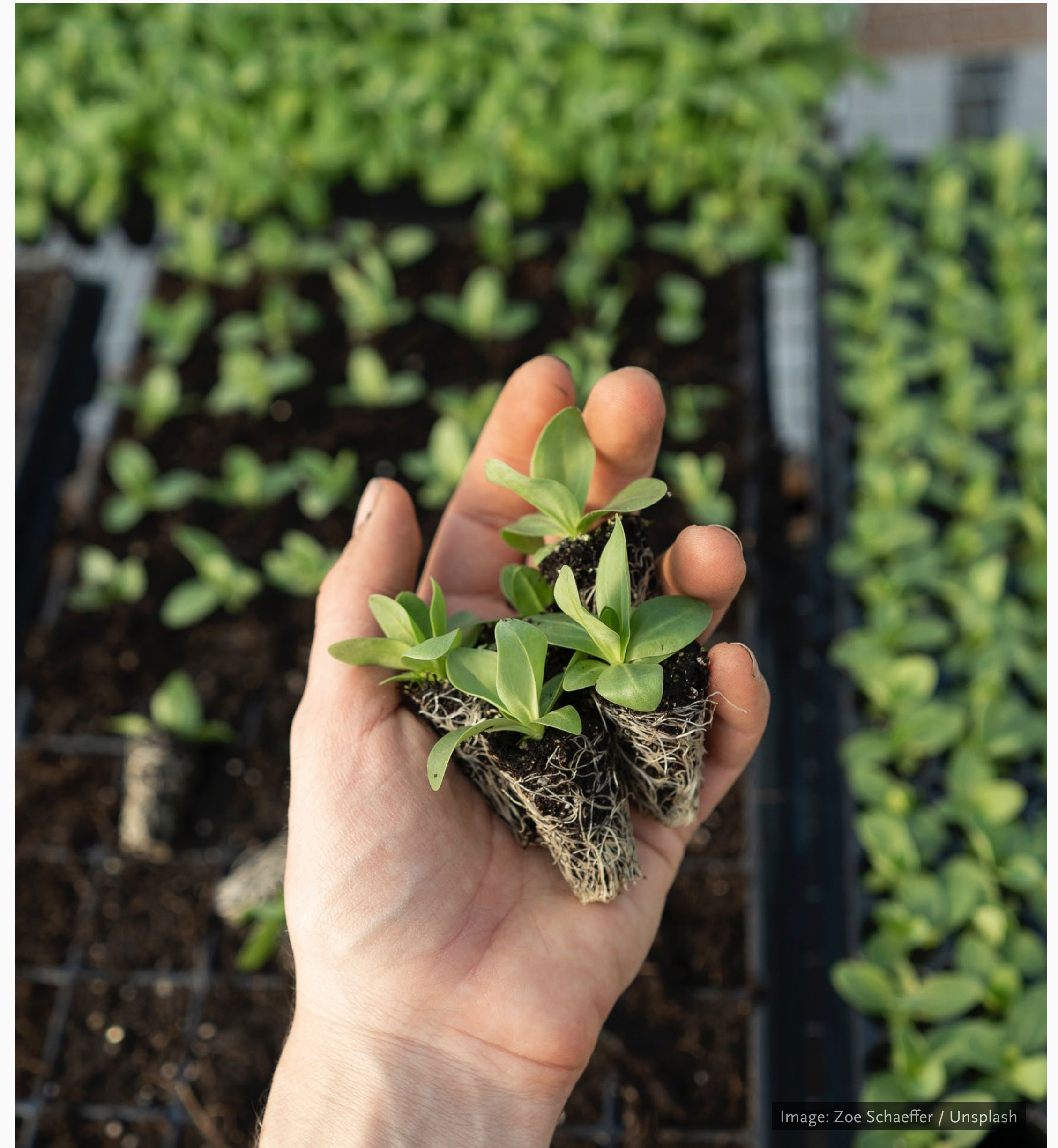


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