PROPOSING A UNIFYING FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Natural Step Network

CONTRIBUTIONS FOR DRAFT ZERO

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT - RIO+20

Our vision:

“Our application framework emerges from the Rio + 20 process which enables communication between sectors (public, private, civil society), social groups and regions. A Unifying Framework provides a practical definition of sustainability making it possible to get consensus on the gap between current situation and sustainability. This enables a systematic evaluation of policies, strategies and actions and their return on investment. The public is re-energized and galvanized into action, as happened with Local Agenda 21 and the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals).”

This document is the result of the collective wisdom of a community of around 1,000 sustainability practitioners from all over the world. They base their practice on a research that dedicated the last 20 years to develop, test, apply, and improve a robust, scientific-based framework which emerged in Sweden from a process of consensus building. The participants—scientists, policy makers, and business leaders—aimed to add value to the transition process of businesses, municipalities and organizations in general to move towards sustainability.

THE PILLARS OF THE RIO+20 CONFERENCE

This Unifying Framework proposes principles that address a “holist, equitable and far-sighted approach to decision making at all levels’. In complying with these principles we will ensure “intra- and inter-generational equity” enabling institutions to be in service of the goal of sustainable development. The Unifying Framework makes it practical to integrate economic, social, environmental goals and objectives. It will also be of service to the decisions and policies on both the first pillar “Green Economy in the Context of Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication” and the second pillar: "Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development”.

According to the Rio+20 guidelines, the Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development pillar is mostly focused in proposing an institutional reform within the UN system, examining its governance model with the aim to address sustainable development. Although, it is absolutely needed and urgent that those discussions happen within the conference process and beyond, this is not enough to ensure that the UN system will be equipped appropriately to face all the governance challenges to implement strategies towards sustainable development.

Therefore we propose here that ‘The Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development’ discussions take one step further, as to besides agreeing on an effective UN governance model, also adopt and indicate in the Conference Final Report what we call the ‘Unifying Framework for Sustainable Development’, enabling the various stakeholders to be effective in making concrete steps towards sustainability.
Throughout the last 40 years, most notably after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, a number of tools, concepts and standards have emerged for better ecological performance especially in businesses and industries. Many initiatives with general or specific applications have been developed, such as Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), the Ecological Footprint, Cradle-to-Cradle, Factor X, EMS, ISO 14001, among others. Likewise, many other tools and concepts which included the social and economic perspectives were developed and widely applied, to name a few: Agenda 21, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), The Earth Charter, Fair-Trade, Global Compact, TNS Framework, ISO 26001 and GRI.

The United Nations recognize the relevance of the tools, standards and concepts to establish a common knowledge which enables nations, municipalities, businesses, NGOs and UN bodies to standardize, create and measure policies, transnational agreements and strategic plans, to accelerate the process towards sustainable development.

Many tools and concepts for Sustainable Development created promising assemblies, networks and organizations using bits and pieces of those concepts and tools for their respective projects and programs. In fact, a systemic view of these tools shows them to be complementary, instead of competing with each other, as well as potentially beneficial for deciding on policies and actions that create economic benefit from both environmental and social wellbeing perspective.

However, a vast resource still lies unexploited: the highest potential of using all tools, concepts and standards articulated within a unifying framework, brings needed clarity, enables actions as part of “full-picture” strategic plans, and helps monitor complete processes to track true progress.

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The proposal here is to guide sustainable solutions by systems thinking. Ever so well-intended decisions outside the realm of a systems perspective, often leads to sub-optimization or worse – blind alleys.

By inviting the most accepted tools, concepts and standards to convene in evaluating and co-creating a Unifying Framework for Sustainable Development, already proven scientifically to be possible (Robért, K.-H. (2000), "Tools and concepts for sustainable development, how do they relate to a general framework for sustainable development, and to each other?" Journal of Cleaner Production 8(3): 243-254), we envision:

“An application framework emerges from the Rio + 20 process which enables communication between sectors (public, private, civil society), social groups and regions. A Unifying Framework provides a practical definition of sustainability making it possible to get consensus on the gap between current situation and sustainability. This enables a systematic evaluation of policies, strategies and actions and their return on investment. The public is re-energized and galvanized into action, as happened with Local Agenda 21 and the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals). “

Tools, concepts and standards all convening to a common platform that we call “The Unifying Framework” to be applied on a collaborative and complementary basis to support UN system, nations, municipalities, businesses and NGOs to make concrete stepping stones towards sustainability; that is the most effective way to accelerate the journey towards sustainability ... through COLLABORATION. There is no more powerful word in actual days to tackle current worldwide challenges.
Through a five level structure it is possible to understand how all the tools, concepts and standards can serve to a Unifying Framework:

| SYSTEMS (LEVEL 1) | Society and Economy within Biosphere |
| SUCCESS (LEVEL 2) | Shared Vision of Sustainability |
| STRATEGIC (LEVEL 3) | Sustainable Development - Strategic Pathways |
| ACTIONS (LEVEL 4) | Concrete stepping stones towards sustainability |
| TOOLS (LEVEL 5) | Tools, concepts and standards for decision support |

**SYSTEMS LEVEL** - Level 1 represents the overarching system that we are focusing on, i.e. the economy and society as a wholly owned subsidiary of the biosphere.

Sustainability has to do with society being able to perpetuate the cycles of nature and allow new generations of people to live and prosper on a healthy planet. The challenge society is facing today is that humankind is acting in a way that compromises the system’s conditions—creating unbalances by dispersing extracts from the earth’s crust & synthetic products foreign to nature, faster than it can assimilate them; by physically destroying eco-systems; and by hindering people’s capacity to meet basic needs—since we live in a closed system in regard to matter, the only open element being the sun regenerating the system through photosynthesis”.

| Cycles of Nature | How mankind influences Nature’s cycles |

* Biosphere within the Systems Level
**SUCCESS LEVEL** - Level 2 defines the shared goal, the vision of sustainability within the biosphere. This requires having a clear and practical definition of what sustainability means.

The ‘Brundtland Report’ defines sustainable development as development that ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED, 1987, 8). This widely accepted definition describes what we have succeeded to accomplish when we have a sustainable society. However, this definition should be complemented with additional detail which makes it more operational and provides guidance for sustainable development planning.

A principle-based definition of sustainability, building-block of the methodology we propose here, gives us such guidance. The principles are derived by clustering known sustainability-related impacts to identify root cause mechanisms. By reversing those mechanisms, and then testing their creativity potential on out-of-the-box solutions & basic re-designs, it has been possible to derive basic principles for sustainability:

"In a sustainable society nature is not subject to systematically increasing...
I. concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust, (such as fossil carbon or metals),
II. concentrations of substances produced by society, (such as nitrogen compounds, CFC's, and endocrine disrupters),
III. degradation by physical means (such as large scale clear-cutting of forests and over-fishing)
And, in that society...
IV. people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs." (such as from the abuse of political and economic power)."


These principles have been tested, and continuously refined in cooperation between researchers and scientists, business corporations and local governments with the objective of being (i) necessary to not confuse the picture with highly debatable values etc., (ii) sufficient to cover all aspects of sustainability, (iii) general to be easy to understand in any area or on any arena to allow cooperation across sectors and disciplines, (iv) concrete to guide decisions and actions in real life, and (v) mutually exclusive to allow comprehension and development of indicators to monitor progress towards compliance with the principles.

**STRATEGIC LEVEL** - Level 3 focuses the process to reach the vision (level 2). Investments should be planned strategically. This implies a step-by-step approach towards the success level in a way that ensures that financial, social, and ecological resources continue to feed the process. Trade-offs are selected according to their capacity to serve as platforms towards complying with principles of success.

**BACKCASTING FROM PRINCIPLES**

To analyze outcomes and take strategic decisions with reference to a full systems perspective in the future, i.e. to seek smart development paths once it is made clear what we want to accomplish, we propose the Backcasting planning methodology. This approach begins by formulating a shared vision of an imagined future success. Keeping this goal in mind while examining the present situation, stakeholders may devise smart development paths to reach their shared vision (level 2).
We acknowledge that it is difficult to make many people agree on detailed images of a distant future since we have different values, while technical and cultural conditions keep developing and changing. What may be a smart solution today might appear as a hopelessly obsolete solution tomorrow. That is why the proposed methodology suggests that we apply backcasting based on principles, meaning that we can do anything, but constrained by the limits of a sustainable society - the Four Sustainability Principles (4 SPs).

Smart strategic pathways (i) lead in the direction of the vision, (ii) are flexible with regard to other possible measures and steps further ahead, and (iii) are likely to give good return on investment—financial, social, environmental, political—for further investments in new stepping stones towards sustainability.

**ACTION LEVEL** - Level 4 is about everything we do in concrete terms. We apply the strategic guidelines at level 3 to inspire, inform and scrutinize every action or investment.

**TOOLS LEVEL** - Level 5 relates to Tools, Concepts and Standards that are often required for decision support, in addition to monitoring and disclosures of the (level 4) actions to ensure they are chosen (level 3) strategically to arrive stepwise at the (level 2) objectives in the (level 1) system.

An attempt to contribute to a visual understanding of the dynamics of 5 levels above is presented in the figure below:

![ABCD Process](image)

This is what we call the ABCD process: A) design and share visions of success that are informed by the sustainability principles; B) perform assessments of the current situation, using the envisioned future within sustainability principles as a lens; C) brainstorm actions potentially leading to the vision including the sustainability principles, and D) find smart strategic pathways that make use of the identified actions as stepping stones. The prioritized actions and measures are then clustered and formulated into clear targets.

**AN INVITATION FOR COLLABORATION**

The Tools, Concepts and Standards provide important contributions for Levels 4 (Actions) and 5 (Tools) by management, communication and monitoring processes and represent key pillars in the Unifying Framework. With this document we are specifically seeking cooperation with key tools-developer
entities which developed and/or manage such concepts and approaches, to play a complementary role in crafting a strong Unifying Framework allowing different types of organizations to have a systemic perspective; envision a sustainable future; and create, implement & monitor a journey towards sustainability.

If chosen actions are guided by a system’s perspective and a long term vision of sustainable development, following smart strategic pathways and using a toolkit which encompasses all the knowledge developed so far, we will most likely be on the right track to build the society we envision together.

In summary, we believe the Rio+20 Conference can be a key milestone in society’s journey towards sustainability by creating the opportunity to bring together methodologies proven over the years to be effective for their own specific purpose, but that acquire a more powerful role in the broader context of the Unifying Framework for Sustainable Development - a new era of accelerated transformation towards sustainability.

**CONCRETE ACTIONS OF THE PROJECT TOWARDS RIO+20**

1) Invite the most accepted tools, concepts and standards to convene in evaluating and co-creating the Unifying Framework for Sustainable Development. Such coalition will be developed during the process towards Rio +20;

2) Participate in forums and conferences preparatory to Rio+20, in different parts of the world to present the Unifying Framework concept;

3) Pre-launch the Global Game for transformational social change (developed by the Brazilian Edgard Gouveia Jr – Ashoka fellow who developed the Oasis Game in Brazil). The pre-launch will take place in Rio during the Rio+20 Conference, inviting all participants and present audience to participate in the game—which envisions having 2 billion players in 4 years. Official launch is scheduled for December 2012. This game will integrate an online platform with the real world by connecting and challenging people around the world to play with and against each other to perform tasks that transform our world. Through the game’s online platform, players will be challenged to create individual, local, regional and global actions.

The game is being developed with the conceptual basis of the Unifying Framework for Sustainable Development.
4) Build leadership capacity for sustainable development through transformative dialogues using the World Café format, combined with the ABCD process (which is part of the Unifying Framework) to build the Shared Vision for Sustainability. These Roundtables will take place in various parts of the world during the process towards Rio+20 (Dec – Jun, 2012), culminating in a huge event called "1000 Round Tables", in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, during the days of the conference.

The event will invite 10,000 people (10 people per table) to participate in an energizing and engaging dialogue calling for action to build the future of a sustainable society (which starts now!). This World Café model was inspired by the ‘1000 Round Tables’ held in Tel Aviv, Israel last Sept, 2011.

The proposal of the Unifying Framework for Sustainable Development together with these powerful actions – The Global Game for Transformational Social Change and the Round Tables process – will definitely inspire renewed commitment and increased actions towards sustainable development. We hope the Rio+20 Secretariat sees value in this initiative and give us full support to move it forward.

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