

The Natural Step Framework: A Review

The Natural Step Framework is a comprehensive model for strategic planning and decision making. It combines a rigorous, science-based understanding of sustainability with a tested planning approach to create real and transformative change.

There are five core concepts in The Natural Step Framework, which are explained in brief on the following pages. In a subsequent section (Step A – Awareness), you will find some resources to help you share the key concepts of the Framework with others. Remember that this is only a review, and that you should have a strong familiarity with The Natural Step before you begin the process outlined in this guide.

The remainder of this guide will equip you with the tools to move toward sustainability by applying Backcasting from Sustainability Principles through a strategic planning process.

Expanding your Toolbox

There are many different tools and resources to help you on your sustainability journey. For example, additional research into personal leadership, adult learning, organizational change, facilitation, group dynamics, and systems thinking will help you make this planning process all the more inspiring and productive. A list of key resources can be found at the end of the document on page 51.

Going Deeper

To read the story of how The Natural Step was developed, check out *The Natural Step Story: Seeding a Quiet Revolution* by Dr. Karl-Henrik Robèrt. For more information on this, please visit www.thenaturalstep.org/resources.

Concept Review

Core Concepts

1. The Sustainability Challenge

Increasing pressures on organizations as a result of society's unsustainable path.

2. Backcasting

A planning process in which a successful outcome is imagined in the future.

3. The Sustainability Principles

The four principles provide the constraints within which society can operate sustainably. Organizations can adopt these principles to help guide their planning and decision-making processes.

4. Backcasting from Sustainability Principles

Backcasting means beginning with the end in mind. The sustainability principles help planners agree on where an organization needs to be in the future and understand where it is today so they can make decisions and plan strategically toward sustainability.

5. ABCD Planning Process

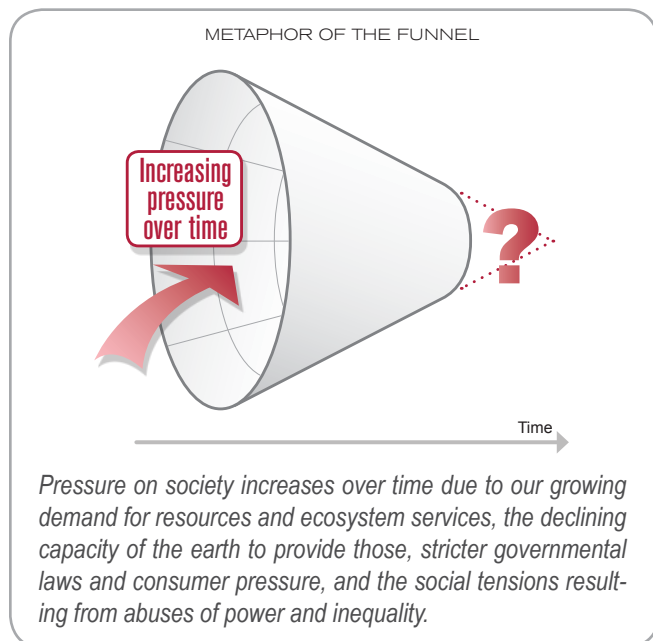
A practical process to move efficiently, effectively and economically from theory to action. This method is based on backcasting from sustainability principles and consists of four steps which are repeated as the organization moves toward sustainability: Awareness... Baseline Analysis... Compelling Vision... Down to Action.

1. The Sustainability Challenge

While the past century has brought extraordinary improvements in human health and medicine, public education, and material well-being, the unintended side effect of our progress has been the destruction of ecosystems, the undermining of human needs, and a way of life that cannot continue for much longer. The consequence of living beyond the planet's means is that ecosystems are being run down, resources are disappearing and waste is accumulating in the air, land and water. The resulting impacts – such as clean water shortages and climate change – are putting the well-being and development of all nations at risk.

A simple way of visualizing these challenges is to picture a funnel. The walls of the funnel represent the increasing pressures on us – our growing demand for resources and ecosystem services, the declining capacity of the earth to provide those resources and services, stricter governmental laws and consumer pressure, and the social tensions resulting from abuses of power and inequality.

The most important element of this metaphor is the systematic nature of the pressures we face. There are many different problems, but the overall trend is that these problems are becoming increasingly common and increasingly severe because they are a direct result of the way our society grows and develops.



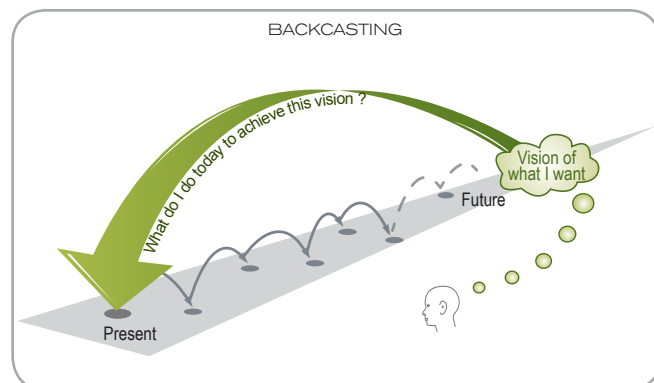
The sustainability challenge is to avoid 'hitting the walls' while reducing the pressures so the funnel can open up again.

2. Backcasting

Backcasting is a fancy term for something we are all familiar with – beginning with the end in mind. It refers to the process of deciding on something we want in the future and then figuring out what we have to do today to get there. At the individual level, most of us backcast automatically, but when we plan for the future in larger groups, such as communities, municipalities or businesses, we tend to use *forecasting* instead. This involves using past information to establish trends and then developing a plan based on projecting these trends out into the future.

Forecasting is very effective if we are happy with how things are going. But when we want – or need – a very different future than the one we are headed toward, we need to backcast.

In the case of planning for sustainability, backcasting is a useful method because of the complexity of the sustainability challenge and the need to develop new ways of doing things to address the challenge. This planning method also helps ensure that we move toward our desired goal as efficiently as possible. The focus on beginning with the end in mind means that planners start by agreeing on the conditions that will make their work a success.



3. The Sustainability Principles

The four sustainability principles are derived from the system conditions for a sustainable society and provide explicit guidance for any individual or organization interested in moving toward sustainability. The sustainability principles allow us to identify the conditions for success in a sustainable society. Since the principles are the result of broad scientific consensus, they help frame a goal that people and organizations all over the world can share. If we can agree on those principles as the basic criteria for a sustainable society, they become our starting point and help us evaluate our ideas and plan for the future while making the most effective and efficient use of our resources.

4. Backcasting from Sustainability Principles

Backcasting from the sustainability principles suggests that to move toward sustainability we must:

- 1. Reduce and eventually eliminate our contribution to the systematic accumulation of materials from the earth's crust.** This means substituting our use of certain minerals that are scarce in nature with others that are more abundant, using all mined materials efficiently, and systematically reducing our dependence on fossil fuels.
- 2. Reduce and eliminate our contribution to the systematic accumulation of substances produced by society.** This means systematically substituting certain persistent and unnatural compounds with ones that are nor-

mally abundant or break down more easily in nature, and using all substances produced by society efficiently.

- 3. Reduce and eliminate our contribution to the ongoing physical degradation of nature.** This means drawing resources only from well-managed eco-systems, systematically pursuing the most productive and efficient use of those resources and land, and exercising caution in all kinds of modifications of nature, such as over-harvesting and the introduction of invasive species.
- 4. Reduce and eliminate our contribution to conditions that systematically undermine people's ability to meet their basic needs.** This means offering products and services and changing practices, suppliers, and business models to those that ensure that human rights are respected, income-making barriers are removed, safe and healthy work environments are provided, and living conditions allow local communities to meet the needs of citizens.

SYSTEM CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing...



...concentrations of substances extracted from the earth's crust,



...concentrations of substances produced by society,



...degradation by physical means,

and, in that society...



...people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.

Picture this!

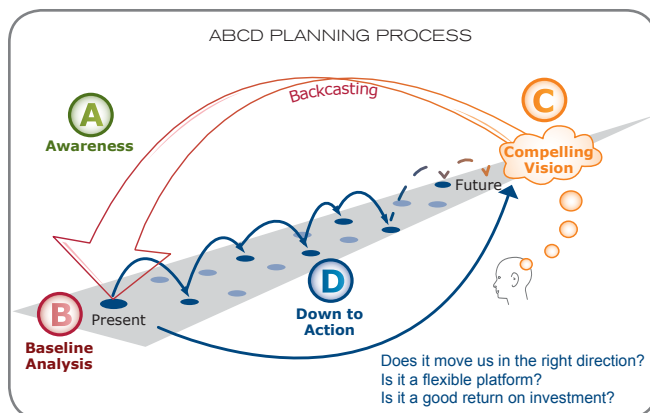
Think of the four sustainability principles as the four sides of a picture frame. They provide very clear boundaries for the canvas inside, but it's up to you to create the painting; the picture of your organization operating sustainably. The principles are **descriptive, not prescriptive**, so you are free to design actions that fit your unique situation. In your team, unleash your inner artists and be creative. Let potential actions spring up: new energy systems, resource efficiency improvements, substitutions of certain materials, or new and more service-oriented and resource-efficient business models. There is no one right way to paint the picture of success.



5. The ABCD Planning Process

To create a sustainable society, we need both a vision of where we want to be and a plan for getting there. There are many ways to plan for sustainability, and The Natural Step process this guide describes is only one of them. What makes this approach unique is that it allows you to build a strategic plan based on the four sustainability principles, using the backcasting method to evaluate each possible action for its strategic value. The process involves four basic steps: **A**wareness, **B**aseline Analysis, **C**ompelling Vision and **D**own to Action.

Although the steps are listed alphabetically as ABCD, they are not necessarily meant to be followed in a linear way. Most people find themselves revisiting each of these planning steps many times, as they move up a spiral of change. Throughout these planning steps, the sustainability principles will help you to keep the end in mind as you tackle the multiple decisions involved in long-term planning. What's considered realistic and possible today shouldn't affect the direction of change, only its pace.



Going Deeper

Remember to check out The Natural Step Sustainability Primer (www.thenaturalstep.org/en/canada/toolkits) and the Sustainability 101 eLearning Course (www.thenaturalstep.org/elearning) for more.

The Spiral of Change: The Cyclical Nature of the ABCD

In practice, the ABCD process is cyclical, not linear, with each step helping to inform the others. For example, you may start simply by creating awareness (A) in a small group of key people, and those people may work to create a high level baseline analysis (B) and a draft sustainability vision (C) for input. During this time, this group may already begin to identify some early projects or prototypes (D) to implement. As the team demonstrates that their early projects are successful, they may get support for more projects.



One of the key projects could be a broader training and awareness raising program (A) that targets the top managers in the organization, as well as a more in-depth analysis of product lifecycles (B) and the development of strategic goals for the entire organization (C) based on the draft developed by the initial team. As part of the review of the process to engage people in the strategic goals, staff can be invited to provide ideas and resources to implement them (D), and so on.

As your group spirals up the ABCD process, you will:

- Generate increasing engagement and awareness of sustainability and its relevance to the organization (A);
- Clarify the gap between the current reality and your desired sustainable future. Looking back and forth between your group's aspirations and its current reality will help develop a creative tension between the two, sparking more ideas and innovations (B – C);
- Implement more and more smart moves toward sustainability, starting with the 'low hanging fruit' that are platforms for bolder initiatives in the future (D).