



STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Abstract

We have previously published a general model for planning in complex systems. It distinguishes five hierarchically dependent levels that should not be confused with each other: (i) The constitution of the system itself, (ii) principle definition of a favorable outcome of the planning, (iii) strategic principles to reach a favorable outcome, (iv) actions, and (v) toolbox. Sustainable development implies systematically decreasing negative impacts on the systems level (i) and should put the highest priority on such impacts that cause systematic and irreversible damage. This is true for social sustainability as it is for the environment.

Before one can fill in the other levels in the model, one must first study the first level (constitution of the system) thoroughly enough to be able to inform the other levels. The five levels have been elaborated for the objective of supporting systematic planning towards sustainability. For social sustainability: Level (i) elaborates constitutional human needs and basic preconditions for the structuring of society to meet those needs – in particular the preconditions that are potentially vulnerable and need to be identified to arrive at level (ii); level (ii) states that the objective of planning is to meet constitutional human needs everywhere, i.e. to arrive at a societal design that does not undermine the potential for people to meet their needs; level (iii) elaborates general guidelines for the design of strategies that can bring us to social sustainability; (iv) investigates various categories of concrete actions that can comply with the strategic guidelines; and level (v) investigates relevant management routines and indicators for the monitoring of progress.

Keywords:

Strategic Planning
Backcasting
Basic Principles
Human needs
Sustainable Development
Social Sustainability
Triple Bottom Line

Introduction

Delivering on the social dimension of sustainability was never more essential. Humanity with impoverished societies cannot help itself from impoverishing the earth.

In this paper we have presented a brief outline of our attempts to answer the “why” question in relation to social sustainability, using the science and systems approach.

The goal of sustainable development is social and ecological sustainability for us as a species. Each of these elements (social and ecological) is a necessary component of sustainability, at the same time as they are prerequisites for each other. Sometimes “Economic Sustainability” is made part of the ultimate goal of sustainability – such as in the popular term “Triple Bottom Line”. However, a strong enough economy is a sub-ordered component of any long-term social objective. Furthermore, unlike social and ecological sustainability, economic sustainability must encompass the whole transition and is not something we can wait for. Bankruptcy inherently means that an institution’s contribution to social and ecological sustainability comes to an end.

In work previously published^{1,2}, we have expressed the objective of social and ecological sustainability in terms of four System Conditions, which are basic principle-level definitions of a sustainable outcome for society as well as for organisations. “Economic sustainability” is dealt with as a strategic approach for the transition that can bring organisations and society at large – step by step – in the direction of social and ecological sustainability.

The first three System Conditions refer to ecological sustainability, while the fourth states that in a sustainable society “...human needs are met worldwide.” The four system conditions (i) cover sustainability, (ii) are complementary i.e. don’t overlap, (iii) are general enough to be relevant for all organisations and societal activities and (iv) are concrete enough to serve as guidelines for relevant questions, and for concrete actions. The latter point means that each of the principles needs to be elaborated in more detail, partly to assess their respective implications, partly to apply them as goals for strategic planning.

The intention of this paper is to look at the social aspects of sustainability from a ‘strategic planning’ perspective. We have outlined this perspective in a number of earlier publications^{1, 2, 3} where we describe the process of planning by means of backcasting from basic principles for a successful outcome, specifically the four System Conditions. Our strategic approach is based on the following hierarchically independent levels^{3,4}, each of which represents a key question or set of questions that should be answered in turn if the planning process is to be both thorough and far-sighted. These five levels apply to strategic planning within any complex system.

1. **System Level.** How is the system itself constituted? The system needs to be studied thoroughly enough on the principle level to be able to arrive at the next level, which defines a successful outcome for planning within the system.

¹ Robèrt, K.-H., Daly, H., Hawken, P., and Holmberg, J. 1997. A Compass for Sustainable Development. *Int. J. World Ecol.* 4, 79-92.

² Holmberg, J. Robèrt, K.-H. Backcasting a framework for strategic planning. *Int J. Sustain. Dev. World Ecol.* Volume 7 (4) 2000, 291-308.

³ Robèrt, K.-H. 2000. Tools and concepts for sustainable development, how do they relate to a framework for sustainable development, and to each other? *Int. J. of Cleaner Production.* Volume 8 (3) 2000, 243-254.

⁴ Robèrt, K.-H., Schmidt-Bleek, B., Aloisi de Larderel, J., basile, G., Jansen, L, L., Kueht, R., Price Thomas, P., and Suzuki, M. 2000. Strategic sustainable development – selection, design and synergies off applied tools -. *Journal of Cleaner Production.* In press.

2. **Success Level:** What are the basic conditions for a successful outcome, in this case a sustainable society? Our approach to defining these conditions has been to search for basic mechanisms by which humanity can destroy the system “Biosphere with its Human Societies”, and then implement a “not” in such basic mechanisms.
3. **Strategic Level:** What are the principles and guidelines by which actions can be fostered in a strategic way to help us to move purposefully and successfully towards success?
4. **Action Level :** This level comprises any concrete action undertaken in order to reach success.
5. **Tool Box Level:** This level comprises the tools that would help us to (a) manage and monitor our actions so that they comply with our plan, (b) build our capacity to carry out effective actions in support of the strategy and (c) measure directly whether our progress had the intended positive effect in the system.

This paper considers each of these levels in turn, specifically as they relate to planning for social sustainability. Thus at the Success Level (Level 2) we define the necessary conditions for social sustainability and backcast from there, identifying at levels 3, 4 and 5 the steps that should be considered when planning to achieve those conditions.

For each level, we have then attempted to describe – at a basic principle level –relevant aspects of social sustainability that we believe would follow logically from the definition of that level. Our aim is to provide comprehension and concrete guidelines to any organisation that wants to approach social sustainability through systematic planning. However, social sustainability is inherently a complex matter. Therefore, we regard this paper as a working paper outlining a structure for further dialogue, and we welcome contributions. One of our major concerns is to ensure that outcomes and methodologies for social sustainability are pursued in the overall context of sustainable development, not separately. We believe The Natural Step Framework offers a science-based model to help organisations get to grips with environmental, economic and social sustainability, in a unified manner.

Level One – Constitution of the System

At this level it is necessary to define the essential elements of the system, and the basic mechanisms by which they relate to each other. What are the critical dynamics, or big-picture flows, which determine the limits of the system?

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Level One for Social Sustainability. Nature¹ is one system, within which all species and individuals are interconnected including human societies. Through the interdependencies within that system, individual actions always have consequences for other parts and other relationships in the system, e.g. for other people, social groups and for other species;

Though each person is unique, we share certain characteristics common to the human species. Many of these are relatively trivial in terms of defining conditions for social sustainability – e.g. the fact that we have four fingers and a thumb on each hand. Some characteristics, however, are critical for our understanding of a socially sustainable outcome of any planning process. In the search for constitutional aspects of the system that are relevant for the success level i.e. that “human needs are met world wide”, understanding human needs is obviously important.

By human need, we mean a constitutional desire that must be satisfied – physically, socially or internally - for humans to survive and thrive. The term “need” is distinct from our *ways* of satisfying the need. The latter are called “satisfiers” and are sometimes confused with needs. Manfred Max-Neef⁵ identifies nine fundamental human needs (Subsistence, Protection, Affection, Understanding, Identity, Creation, Participation, Leisure and Freedom). Through human history these needs have been satisfied in variety of ways, each culturally and temporally defined. Yet the notion of a small, discrete number of fundamental needs to which these varied ‘satisfiers’ are a response is repeatedly validated.

Max-Neef also points out that these nine fundamental needs must be taken as a whole. In other words, they are substitutable only to a limited extent. If a person’s need for affection is being systematically denied, for example, additional subsistence or participation or freedom will only substitute up to a point. Thereafter, the denied need will surface as what Max-Neef describes as a ‘poverty’, which, if it is not remedied, may become pathology. Even in societies where basic needs of food and shelter are met social discord is frequently traced to poverties people experience in relation to other needs, such as participation, creation, identity and affection. Social pathologies are a feature of the modern world, not the least in very affluent countries. Such pathologies are not cured by economic growth in general. On the contrary, when “economic growth” does not qualitatively distinguish between constructive and destructive investments and measures in society its repercussions are seen in social as well as environmental degradation. Furthermore, because of the interdependencies of the social system there are negative feedback loops involved, damaged environment = damaged society = damaged environment, and so on.

Humans typically self-organize in social structures to meet the full range of their needs. We organise in social groups partly because many of our individual needs are in fact related to other humans – e.g. participation, identify and affection It is human to be social.

⁵ Manfred Max-Neef, Antonio Elizalde & Martin Hopenhayn (with the cooperation of four others): Human Scale Development: An Option for the Future, and article in the Development Dialogue Journal, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Uppsala, Sweden, 1989:1
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An essential aspect of social structuring is diversity. Diversity in society reflects the uniqueness of each individual. The societal and cultural diversity, by which societies constitute themselves, are essential elements for the overall robustness and adaptability (resilience) of our species.

In conclusion, our constitutional ability to organize in functional social structures is key for the satisfaction of our physical needs, as well as for our mental and social health. It is at the social as well as the individual level that action must be taken towards sustainable development. We are born with the capacity to meet our needs. We have the same self-organising power of every natural system, from cells to forests. But that power is constrained by our place within a complex social structure, be it family, the tribe or the nation.

To be able” to meet human needs everywhere” – the ultimate goal for a socially sustainable society – we have arrived at the point where interdependencies, self-organisation and diversity seem to be key factors of a robust and effective social structuring. They are scientifically observed features of every natural system. To inform sustainable development, we need to identify the mechanisms and the behaviour which oppose these constitutional characteristics. Where, on the systems level, are conditions for an effective social structuring vulnerable and at risk of being systematically undermined?

For the term “sustainability”, it is essential to distinguish between accidental impacts such as crimes and accidents that will occur also in the sustainable society, and a systematic undermining of the very conditions for health and in the end survival of civilization. Lack of empathy in the way in which we relate to each other - using empathy as a neutral description of our ability to understand other humans – probably lies at the heart of our ineffectiveness in creating sustainable social structures. The endpoint of socially non-sustainable development is barbarism, and the endpoint of ecological non-sustainability is a republic of grass and insects. To keep on ignoring nature's prerequisites for a successful and adaptive system is akin to ignoring thermodynamics. Isolated, disempowering, and homogenous social systems are not sustainable.

The analysis of the systems level leads us to the next level.

Level Two – Conditions for a Successful (Sustainable) Outcome

In earlier work where we set out the four system conditions for sustainability, we showed how valuable it is to express those conditions for success in negative terms. It may be perceived as coercive but actually works the other way around and helps spur creative and positive interactions between people. “As long as we do not violate the principles for success, anything can be considered”.

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Level Two for Social Sustainability. In line with the thinking outlined above, we believe it is essential to express the conditions for a socially sustainable society in negative terms, as a boundary within which diverse and innovative solutions may be sought. Thus we here elaborate the previously published Fourth System Condition (see opening paragraph of the Introduction, above) as follows:

“In a sustainable society, people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.”

We are working on examples of the ways in which society systematically undermines an individual’s capacity to meet his or her needs. Such examples would include disempowerment (poverty, violence, social exclusion) intellectual undermining (media persuasion, cultural oppression) and environmental conditioning (time constraints, stressful occupations, health impacts).

Level Three – Characteristics of Successful Strategy

On the third, strategic, level we seek guidelines that act as a checklist against which to assess our actions and put them into a program for change. Once again, the negative or boundary-setting approach is used. In this way universality is attempted.

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Level Three for Social Sustainability. Here we need a combination of relatively generic strategic principles and ones that apply specifically in the pursuit of our goal of social sustainability. Generic principles, which we recommend in all cases when backcasting from basic principles for sustainability², include the following:

Each measure that we consider should:

- (i) bring us closer to social sustainability as defined in level 2
- (ii) be capable of further development and improvement; and
- (iii) represent a sound investment. i.e. not represent a financially unsustainable drain on our resources.

More specifically, related to the first and second levels in this paper – i.e. the principle ways by which people organize to meet their needs – one would need to check that any strategy:

- a) Does not favour one set of needs being met at the expense of another;
- b) Does not ignore impacts for all those who may be affected now and in the future e.g. the effect on human rights issues and wealth distribution.
- c) Does not perpetuate barriers to people making the most of their potential in their own way.

The key elements for creation of effective social structures outlined in level 1 need corresponding ethical guidelines for fostering of human relationships. Empathy, a neutral description of our ability to understand other human beings even on very subtle levels (see level 1), corresponds to a widely accepted ethical principle for overall guidance of ethical social behavior – The Golden Rule. “We shall not do to others what we do not want them to do to us”, informs all kinds of questions, independent of scale, field, and time. If we – in the industrialised world – “do not want the whole world to use fossil fuels or natural resources in general on the same magnitude as we do, well...” More specifically, the Golden Rule could be applied when we develop generic guidelines for socially aware strategies:

- (i) *Inclusivity.* Is this measure based on an inclusive enough dialogue with stakeholders as well as with other people who are influenced by it?
- (ii) *Transparency.* Is this measure going to be planned and executed in a sufficiently transparent and open fashion that people can see what is going on?
- (iii) *Responsibility.* Are the responsibilities in the decision process made clear enough to those who are planning the measure?
- (iv) *Accountability.* Are the responsibilities in the decision process made clear enough to stakeholders and other people who are affected by the decision, and do the latter have adequate means at their disposal to hold to account those who are responsible for the measure?
- (v) *Honesty.* Would we like anybody to look into our minds, seeing what is really underpinning this measure?

Level Four – Actions

The fourth level provides answers to the following question:

What can we do in concrete terms that contributes to achieving success at level 2– while complying with the strategic principles described in level 3?

Actions can be divided into three categories:

1. Actions for progress, actions that comply with strategic principles (3) to reach success (2).
2. Actions for capacity building. Actions that help improve the capacity of an organisation to make progress.
3. Actions for evaluation of effects in the system (1), i.e. actions for direct evaluation in various communities that are affected by the organisation.

Actions do not need to be described here at length. The number of different possible actions for social sustainability is so large that it would not be possible to cover them all. The whole idea of sketching out the principles in the other levels is to spur creativity. We limit ourselves to just presenting some actions as examples to test the logic and use of the 5-level model.

1. Concrete actions for progress

- Effective stakeholder dialogues where social aspects are made into a process that is used as a core activity of the organisation for all major decisions.
- Production and implementation of tools (see level 5 outlining such tools).
- Looking at the ways one's organisation might be supporting aspects of the economic system that are biased against certain countries or regions.
- Participating in a public debate on the improvement of social structures such as health and education.
- Improving the light at working places.
- Checking how and where company funds are invested e.g. pension funds.

2. Actions for capacity.

- Creating habits of learning for wider staff / stakeholder participation in decision-making, for instance creating an annual seminar on social issues with all categories of stakeholders.
 - Encouraging better listening and learning skills in all management practices.
 - An effective introduction of new staff to inform them about the social objectives of the organisation.
 - Starting a research program to discover best practices for the development of socially aware Employees.
 - Treating colleagues the way the organisation want to appear in society at large.
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3. Actions for evaluation of effects in the system.

- Measuring if sick-days at work decrease.
- Carrying out a social audit.
- Measuring if suppliers – including those in the developing world – are more content with the situation.
- Evaluation if the organisation's reputation for social responsibility has improved and is taken seriously in the market place.
- Reviewing our corporate governance systems against the principles at levels 1, 2 and 3.

Level Five – Tools are available for many of the three categories of actions mentioned in level 4 above.

The tools and models are presented here as examples to test the logic and use of the 5-level model. Social aspects of sustainability could be introduced with various tools for the monitoring of progress, i.e. tools to determine if corporate plans are followed or not. Examples are:

- Social responsibility best practice benchmarks.
- Indicators on corporate practices that are related to the benchmarks.
- Standardised purchasing guidelines that specify socially responsible buying (e.g., fair trade commodities)
- Global Reporting Initiative staff and customer survey models.
- Standardised means of business reporting.
- Social audit methods such as AA1000.

Social aspects of sustainability could be introduced in various tools for the building of capacity. Examples are:

- Corporate Social Responsibility functions and teams
- Leadership is established through making social aspects of sustainability explicit in guiding documents such as core values, policies, code of conduct or statement of ethical values, and so on.
- Learning Programmes and curricula for education of staff on this matter.

Procedures for regular dialogue with stakeholders, as well as the documentation of such dialogues, to be able to apply the ethical guidelines of level 3.

Management systems like ISO 14001.

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