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Effecting Change in Complex Social Systems: A Dialogue on Overarching Principles to Inform Action

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and David Sibbet

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“We are anywhere and anyone... We’re deeply aware of human rights issues, the nuclear threat, drug abuse, civil rights, third world debt, and AIDS. We’ve marched, donated, written and cried... We’re one but not the same and we’re ready for what’s next.”

— *U2 Fan, Quoted by Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, “In the Name of Love: Two Decades of U2,” Cleveland, Ohio (December 2003)*

As efforts to create sustainable societies deepen in the 21st Century, it is noteworthy that technical solutions are advancing. Agro-ecology systems, solar and wind power, “hyper cars,” and numerous other developments are highlighted as alternatives. The problem, however, has been in gaining widespread adoption of new ways of doing things.

The reason is simple. We are all making decisions about what we do on this Earth. And those decisions are shaped by a complex array of forces—ranging from expectations of peers through incentives at work and laws on national and international scales. So, even as engineering and process know-how advances, we see that these technical insights will not shift us to a sustainable world. Rather, our insights into “people-oriented” aspects of social change and sustainability are essential in enabling broad changes.

Inspired by this context, The Natural Step (TNS) and the Case University’s Weatherhead Institute for Sustainable Enterprise (WISE) convened a group of researchers and practitioners of social change to consider the human aspects of moving toward sustainability. The intent was to initiate a collaborative process similar to the past work of TNS and its approach to developing overarching principles for understanding and acting upon the concept of sustainability.

The Natural Step’s earlier work was grounded in a consensus process—among more than 50 Swedish scientists, including a number of Nobel Laureates—with the goal of developing a joint document that would describe basic knowledge of the earth’s functions, and how humans interact with them. The result of those conversations among researchers and analysts was a set of scientifically-based sustainability principles which are known as the Natural Step’s “four system conditions for sustainability.” The first condition for sustainability states that substances extracted from the earth’s crust, such as oil and metals, must not systematically increase in nature. The second condition states that for a sustainable world, substances produced by society, such as plastic, must not systematically increase in nature. The third states that the physical basis for productivity and diversity of nature (e.g. ecosystems), must not be systematically diminished. And finally, the fourth condition states that a precondition of sustainability is that people must be able to meet their human needs.

The Natural Step principles have provided a common mental model for understanding and organizing both thought and action on sustainability issues. However, a critique has been that the principles do not adequately consider the social dynamics at the core of the issues. Three of TNS's principles deal with the physical world and were derived from conversations with natural scientists based on insights from thermodynamics and natural cycles. Only the last principle addresses social systems. This natural science rather than social science focus—reflected in a considerable amount of sustainability writing—is striking given the social dynamics that are at the core of sustainability issues.

Within this context, we co-convened the social change dialogue with researchers and practitioners focused on a wide range of social aspects of sustainability. In assembling the group, we sought out change experts who focus on legal rights through public health and forestry issues, and who deal with different levels of analysis from community through corporate to the individual. The goal of the dialogue was seemingly impossible—in two days, we sought to begin articulating how social change happens in complex social systems. We shared hindsight from past successes, insight from current theory, and foresight on current trends to propose actions that might lead to a better global future.

In December 2003, this group of social science professors and scholarly practitioners met for the dialogue at Case University's Weatherhead School of Management. Though each person came with distinct areas of focus—from environmental justice to organizational redesign—all participants addressed some aspect of how we might develop a more socially just and ecologically sustainable society. This systems approach to sustainability was our common ground from which we sought to identify key factors and dynamics around social change across specific areas of work.

During our two days together, we shared learning about how social change occurs in specific contexts and related to distinct issues. We explored interrelations between current theories, concepts, and approaches. Through a process that included large group discussions, small group working sessions, and individual reflection, we drafted a “consensus statement” identifying core factors and dynamics of social change (within communities, organizations, institutions, etc.). As in the process of developing the Natural Step's principles of sustainability with natural scientists, the dialogue focused on the unusual step of clarifying agreements—rather than areas of disagreement—among social scientists interested in issues of social change.

The dialogue deliberately mixed structured and unstructured interactions. We began with informal conversations over dinner the evening before the dialogue. On our first morning, we broke into small groups to discuss challenging current social issues. We chose one of two cases (distributed in advance) to discuss. The cases were intended to start our conversations and to structure our thinking together by linking our ideas to concrete situations. We discussed the core issues at play and where there might be leverage for change. While considering specific questions about each case, we sought to surface more generalizable assumptions and theories of change. (These conversations are captured in the dialogue proceedings at: http://www.naturalstep.org/research/TNS-WSOM_Dialog_Proceeding.pdf)

Following the meeting, we, the conveners, continued to hone the joint statement and derive a set of overarching principles of social change. Several drafts have been developed, with ongoing review by, and feedback from, the original dialogue group. These principles are a flexible, living treatise that we hope will inspire ongoing work on social change towards sustainability.

Principles on Social Change, Justice, and Sustainability

These principles for social change were developed through discussions during and after a December 2003 dialogue—among social science professors and NGO-based change agents—that was co-convened by The Natural Step (TNS) and the Case Weatherhead Institute for Sustainable Enterprise (WISE). (For a full participant list, please see: http://www.naturalstep.org/research/sc_event.php)

Our world is at a critical juncture. Health epidemics are on the rise globally. Weather patterns are increasingly variable. Wars and social violence are destabilizing communities and continents. Poverty plagues billions of people. Many ecosystems are imperiled.

None of us, individually, has chosen this situation. Yet, collectively, we have created and reinforced harmful dynamics through our actions and institutions.

The urgency of the moment is to find ways that more of us can address both immediate crises and contribute to effective, long-term, systemic change. Our core question is:

How can we fundamentally change the ways in which we live together—with all living beings and systems—so that future generations not only survive but thrive?

While the way toward a more just and sustainable future is not entirely clear, we know that human communities are able to transform their worlds. We take hope from women's growing empowerment globally, the anti-apartheid shift in South Africa, and the political 'green' movement in Europe, to name a few. While the lessons from these successful change efforts are not universal, the following principles inspire us to believe change is possible.

The process of developing these principles is being followed by another effort focused on refinement and application. We welcome all thoughts on further refining the principles. In addition, we invite ongoing testing of these principles through application in others' efforts. We would like to hear what others find and if the principles have been useful in guiding action. Overall, we hope that this work encourages continuing dialogue and exploration of how to infuse social dynamics and social science insights into all of our sustainability work.

Principles

In creating social change, effective efforts we...

Address immediate needs while linking them to larger, systemic issues.

Successful change connects focused efforts with the web of political, economic, cultural, and environmental factors that frame and shape the immediate needs.

Surface discontents, build capacity, and elevate expectations.

Successful change emerges from dissatisfaction with current conditions, but also celebrates many small victories as well as personal learning, thereby continually building momentum for innovation toward a preferred future.

Raise awareness of how social systems support and resist change.

Successful change invites people working at multiple levels—individual, organizational, national, international, etc.— to experiment in creating new realities and transforming the forces that maintain the status quo.

Engage diverse people in partnering for positive action.

Successful change is fueled by a mix of “un-usual” suspects—from those at the periphery of power to those closer to the center—in co-producing alternative futures in a context of mutual respect and relationships of trust.

become the change, innovate with opportunities, and persist.

Successful change is grounded in personal transformation, encourages experimentation, and eventually evolves the system as a whole.

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About the Emerging Knowledge Forum

The Emerging Knowledge Forum serves our community of reflective practitioners, researchers and consultants who are interested in the real-world dynamics of organizational life, and the application of the theories, methods and tools of Organizational Learning in their work. We are particularly interested in publishing work-in-progress that will benefit from reader input. The Forum is designed as a space for sharing ideas, opinions, theoretical models and research results that illuminate the processes and dilemmas of learning and change at the individual, group, organizational and cross-organizational level. Articles posted should pose particular questions or issues for discussion.

The scope is fairly broad, intended to be eclectic, intellectually diverse, and international. We are interested in contributions from researchers, consultants and practitioners. Research reports, learning histories, reflection pieces, conceptual models, theoretical propositions, interviews, case studies, personal accounts and commentary intended to clarify and analyze are all welcome.

Visit our website for submission guidelines:

<http://reflections.solonline.org>

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