

Measuring Success: Indicators for Strategic Approaches to Sustainable Community Planning

As current sustainability challenges continue to threaten the wellbeing of communities around the world, new and innovative approaches to sustainable community planning become increasingly urgent. Understanding what successful planning looks like and transparently monitoring the process through indicators is essential for empowering communities to lead the path toward a sustainable future.

*"We care about what we measure and we measure what we care about."
(Meadows 1998, viii)*

Success Criteria

The planning process must ...

... apply backcasting from the Sustainability Principles

A clear definition of sustainability, encompassed by the Sustainability Principles, is required to inform every decision affecting the future of the community. The vision a community creates for itself must be based on a shared understanding and appreciation of the Sustainability Principles. This understanding of sustainability is taught to create a shared language, greater involvement, and more effective participation. Further, it allows for complete integration of the Sustainability Principles throughout the organization. Decisions, now based on the Sustainability Principles, aim to result in concrete actions (long and short-term) that provide flexible platforms with adequate return on investment (financial, social, political, cultural and/or natural capital), while moving the community towards its vision of sustainability.

... have committed leadership

Political, managerial, and community representatives publicly commit resources to planning for sustainability. In addition, designated planning process managers are given the time and resources to support, lead, and facilitate the process.

... be participatory

Investment is made into political and social capital by developing quality community participation to co-create the future together and increase community ownership of the plan. Community expertise is sought to utilize the expertise of citizens and ensure a whole systems approach. Participation is fair in the sense that everyone has equal opportunity to be heard, however, the goal is community trust and support of the planning process, as opposed to 100% community participation. Lastly, the diversity of public participation reflects the diversity of the community.

... be iterative and adaptive

Planning is an ongoing process that undergoes continual reflection and scrutiny. This facilitates proactive adaptation to changing circumstances and community needs, while allowing for further participation at each iteration.

... be efficient and timely

Reasonable, yet strict, timelines are set, reflecting both capacity of the institution to carry out the process, as well as the urgency of sustainability issues. Hours spent on planning are done so strategically in order to reach desired milestones without hindering progress.

... be transparent

Persons actively working on the planning process are aware of their role within the process, communicate with and feel trust in one another. Successes and failures of the process are communicated openly to ensure transparency through the use of process indicators. Reporting on the planning process is honest, frequent, and thorough where at every stage the public has access to this information.

Success Criteria Indicators

- 1) Has the community adopted a policy to use backcasting from Sustainability Principles to inform every planning decision that pertains to the future of the community? (Yes/No)
- 2) Is the community's vision in line with the Sustainability Principles? (Yes/No)
- 3) Percent of staff that have completed new sustainability training (at a minimum, based on backcasting and the Sustainability Principles) in the last year.
- 4) Average level of staff satisfaction in quality of sustainability training in the past year. (1-5: not satisfied to very satisfied).
- 5) Percent of socio-ecological indicators that reflect a positive change towards complying with the Sustainability Principles.
- 6) Ratio of funds allocated to sustainable initiatives versus amount of money saved or made from sustainable initiatives (sustainable initiatives are initiatives that help the community move towards compliance with the Sustainability Principles, provide flexible platforms, and have good return on investments).
- 7) Percent of planning budget allocated to sustainable planning (any planning in line with Sustainability Principles).
- 8) What is the minimum percent of time that has been written into the planning process manager(s)'s job description to dedicate to the planning process in the next year (basing the percentage on a 40 hour work week)?
- 9) Average community member satisfaction in having the opportunity to participate in the planning process. (1-5: not satisfied to very satisfied).
- 10) Percent of public outreach budget allocated for public sustainability education (at a minimum based on backcasting and the Sustainability Principles).
- 11) Average level of public satisfaction in quality of participation activities in the past year. (1-5: not satisfied to very satisfied).
- 12) Does the diversity (age, sex, ethnicity, income...) of public participation reflect the diversity of the community? (0 - Does not reflect diversity at all; 1 - Reflects some diversity, although no more than 50% of the diversity of the community; 3 - Diversity is reflected).
- 13) How frequently are the results of process indicators updated?
- 14) Percent of planning process deadlines being met within the overall planning process timeline?
- 15) Percent of total municipal departments involved in planning process.
- 16) Is there formal communication between municipal departments to utilize sector expertise in the planning process? (0 - no; 1 - people informally communicate, and don't integrate expertise, 2 - people communicate formally and integrate expertise)
- 17) How frequently are results of process indicators communicated to the public?
- 18) On average, what percent of the community agrees they know where to find information on the planning process?

Core Concepts

The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) – the foundation upon which this research is built – offers a science-based and principled definition of sustainability, as well as a method for structuring, evaluating and informing the selection of indicators to effectively measure the community planning process. At the heart of the FSSD is a process called backcasting from Sustainability Principles, which was used throughout the research to help inform the selection and identification of sustainability indicators for community planning.

The Sustainability Principles

A set of Sustainability Principles (SPs) derived from an understanding of the system (community within society within the biosphere) that describe the basic minimum requirements for a sustainable society.

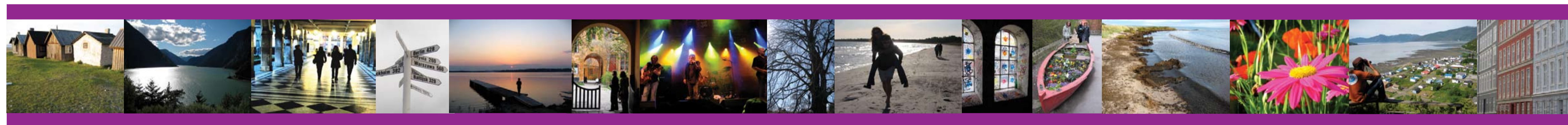
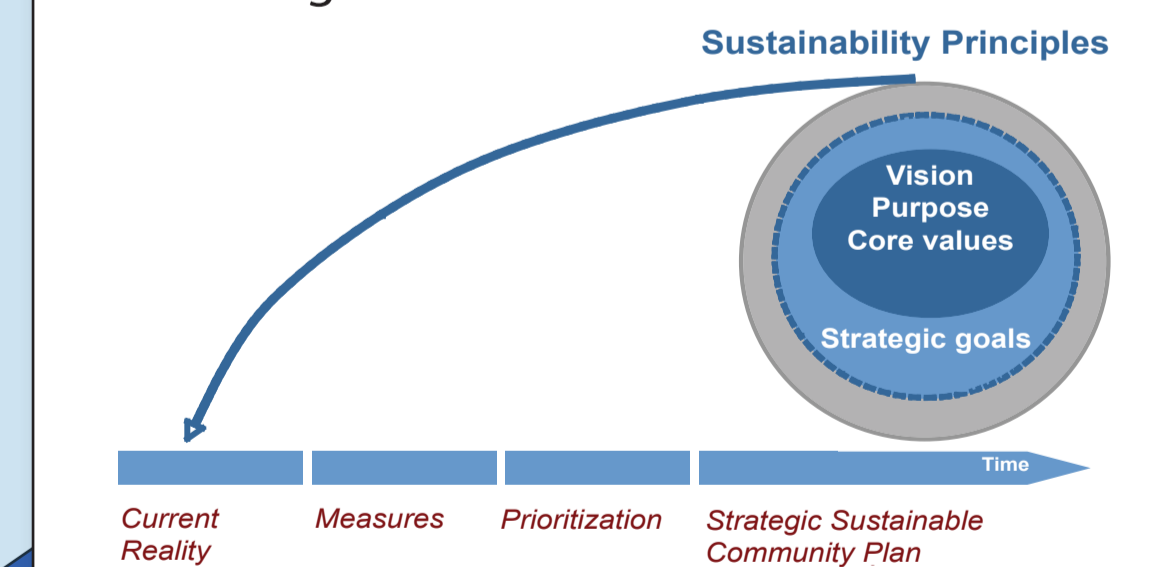
In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing ...

1. concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust,
2. concentrations of substances produced by society,
3. degradation by physical means, and, in that society...
4. people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.

Backcasting from Principles

Backcasting is a method for planning in complex systems by which a successful sustainable outcome is imagined in the future, followed by the question: "what do we need to do today to reach a successful outcome?" Success in this case is defined by outlining the four Sustainability Principles for a sustainable society. Backcasting can be distinguished from the common practice of extending and incrementally influencing current trends known as forecasting because it removes the constraints of historical and present limitations by placing oneself in the future where success has already been achieved.

Backcasting from Vision



Socio-Ecological versus Process Indicators

In sustainable community planning, there are two key categories of indicators:

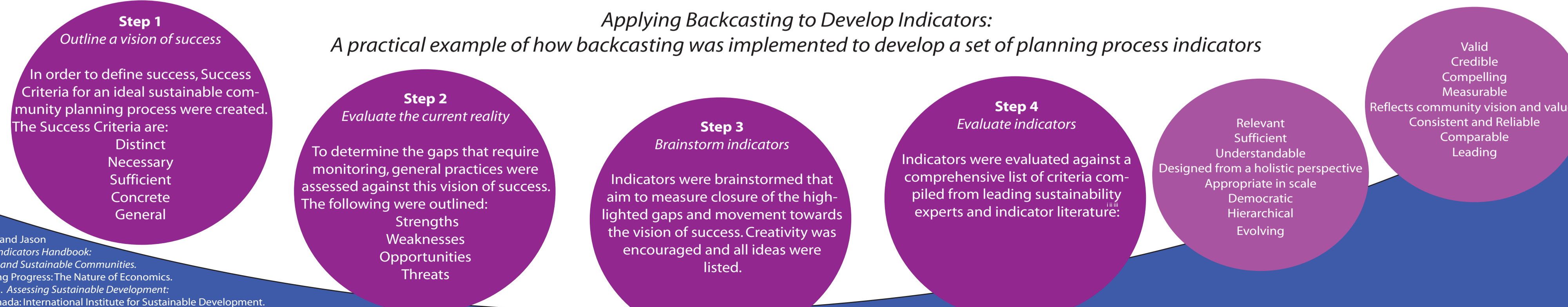
- 1) *Socio-Ecological Indicators* measure how a community's initiatives are performing relative to its vision of sustainability (eg. number of fish in a stream can reflect the success of a stream restoration initiative) and
- 2) *Process Indicators* relate to the success and structure of an organization's planning process (eg. how frequently the results of indicators are communicated to the public can reflect if a planning process is transparent)

Why Process Indicators?

This research confirms that applying whole systems and strategic approaches to identifying indicators is relevant in any context. While a vast array of indicators are available to measure the outcomes of sustainability initiatives, without monitoring if the planning process is participatory, strategic, and in line with a science and systems based definition of sustainability, sustainability initiatives are unlikely to be successful in the long term. Process indicators provide the structure in which to monitor planning at every level and across disciplines. By looking upstream and collecting information about the performance of the planning process, appropriate socio-ecological indicators can then be derived, while simultaneously ensuring more effective governance. Quantifying the steps, impacts and outcomes of community planning will ensure greater accountability and transparency to the community. As an essential component of moving towards a sustainable future, process indicators can uncover strengths and weaknesses of a planning process. This ensures mistakes can be learnt from allowing successes to be shared and repeated around the world.

Applying Backcasting to Develop Indicators:

A practical example of how backcasting was implemented to develop a set of planning process indicators



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