

# The Natural Step Canada Strategic Plan 2013 - 2017

Summary for [www.naturalstep.ca](http://www.naturalstep.ca)





## INTRODUCTION

The Natural Step Canada is an entrepreneurial charity that delivers projects and programs based on our expertise in the social processes of sustainability-driven innovation. Our programs build leadership capacity and develop role models for sustainable communities and businesses. Our approach is based on seeing systems, collaborating across boundaries, and creating desired futures.

We are part of a global network of non-profit organizations that share the same brand, core identity and purpose and that has been at the forefront of sustainable development internationally for more than twenty years. The science-based framework that we employ (called the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development - FSSD) has been used successfully in hundreds of forward-thinking organizations around the world.

For the past 10 years, we have built a solid track record in Canada supporting the emergence of role models for sustainable communities and business. We have done this by working predominantly one organization, one community, one individual at a time. We have worked with dozens of organizations to help them embed sustainability into their strategies, operations, products, services and community plans. We have fostered commitment and competence in hundreds of leaders and practitioners through our learning programs.

It is clear, though, that working one organization at a time won't accelerate change at the speed—or on the scale—the world needs to build a society that is sustainable and resilient. The need to address our collective sustainability crisis is becoming more urgent every day. There is a growing call among leaders for multi-stakeholder collaboration. In the business world, this call for collaboration is often called “Shared Value”; in the not-for-profit world, it is “Collective Impact”. Systems-level collaboration is the only way that we will overcome the complex and interconnected social, environmental, and economic challenges we face.

We believe that The Natural Step Canada is uniquely positioned to leverage our experience in the service of systems-level change. We have built a reputation as leaders in building sustainability literacy. We will make use of this to provide leadership for collective impact on sustainability issues. Doing so is both urgently needed and the logical next step in realizing our theory of change.



## VISION, MISSION, THEORY OF CHANGE

Our **vision** is a sustainable society – one in which individuals, communities, businesses and institutions thrive within nature's limits.

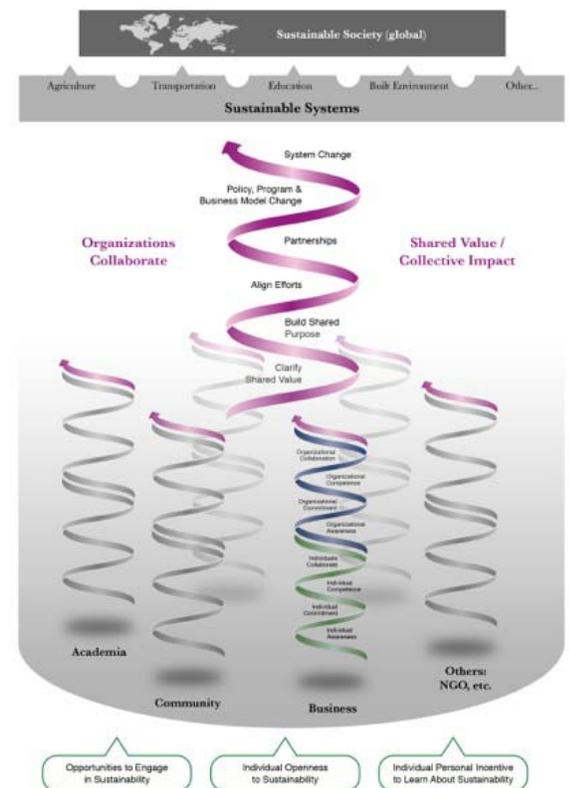
Our **mission** is to accelerate the transition to a sustainable society.

Our **theory of change** is rooted in the belief that the transition to a sustainable society begins by increasing *awareness*, *commitment* and *competence* in individuals to understand what sustainability means, and to integrate sustainability principles into all of their decision-making and actions (see green spiral). As these qualities develop in individuals, they begin to *collaborate* with others and ultimately to build awareness, commitment and competence within their own organizations and communities (see blue spiral).

As organizations advance on their sustainability journeys, they eventually face challenges that are systemic in nature and require them to collaborate with other organizations and sectors. Sustainable systems can only result from systems-changing innovations, policies and partnerships arising from organizations and sectors collaborating effectively (see purple spiral).

The Natural Step's **unique value proposition** in support of this change lies in our expertise in the social processes of sustainability-driven value creation. Getting people to interact with different people and in different ways than they usually do in carefully designed processes that respect the way adults learn is vitally important for sustainability efforts to be enduring and the change to be transformational enough that real value is created. Through the combination of our expertise in applying the FSSD and in process design and facilitation, The Natural Step helps foster creativity, hope, and ambition in this work at every level of the spirals.

The Natural Step Canada: Theory of Change



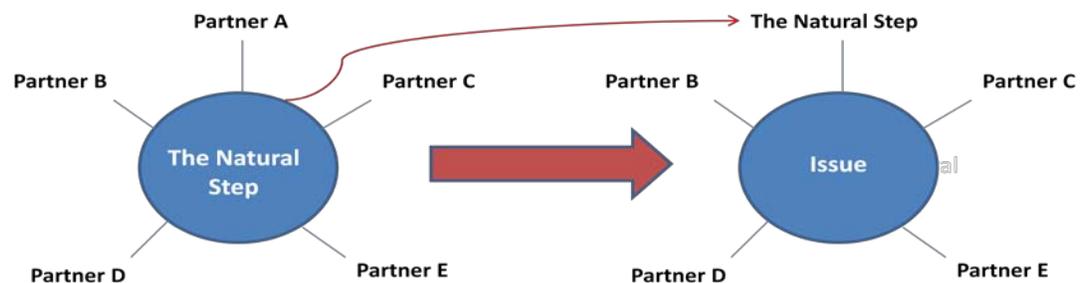


## WHERE WE ARE GOING

### Guiding Philosophy

Two key concepts underlie our new strategic direction. They are “issue leadership” and “collective impact.”

*Issue leadership* is about placing issues, not the organization, at the centre of what we do. It suggests a stronger emphasis on partnerships and coalition building. For The Natural Step, this means shifting from our programs, framework or organization being the starting point for planning and relationship-building to providing leadership on issues that matter to us and others and where our capabilities are of service.



Our approach to issue leadership will not necessarily be to choose a single issue; rather, we will strive to continuously identify important issues where we can make a difference. In this way, issue leadership will be a guiding philosophy and a practice – a way of working - that we will develop as an organization. We have already begun to do so, for example by providing leadership on issues such as a gold standard for sustainable business, and the need for support to encourage youth sustainability champions.

*Collective impact*<sup>1</sup> refers to large scale social change as a result of broad cross-sector coordination between organizations. This is in contrast with “isolated impact” which is focused on change by organizations in isolation. For The Natural Step, this means leading and serving coalitions of organizations aligned around common goals and focused on creating shared value, for example through Sustainability Transition Labs or other multi-stakeholder collaboration.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Collective Impact see: Hanleybrown et. al. 2012. “Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work”. Stanford Social Innovation Review.



## **Strategic Direction**

The Natural Step's strategic focus for 2013-2017 will be on systems-level change toward sustainability. We will help organizations collaborate to overcome systemic barriers to sustainability by leveraging the experience we have gained, our track record in leading change in organizations, our credibility as an NGO, and other assets such as our educational materials, competencies, and relationships, and putting our unique value proposition in the service of issue leadership and collective impact.

This means placing less emphasis on advisory services to single organizations and more emphasis on facilitating collaboration, while expanding our efforts to build sustainability literacy more broadly.

We are doing so because we believe it will:

- increase our impact;
- make collective impact and issue leadership the driving ethos of the organization;
- put TNS back into a leadership role;
- energize our people;
- open us up to new audiences;
- demonstrate the relevance of our core competency of building sustainability literacy among decision-makers;
- position us as significant players in the emerging social innovation space and distinguish ourselves from the growing number of sustainability consultants;
- allow us to focus our branding efforts to become known for something specific – focus is magnetic;
- build on the skills we have developed as sustainability advisors;
- build from our track record with communities work in Canada and sector work internationally.

Most importantly, we are doing so because of a core belief that systemic change is essential and can only be achieved through sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration.



## **Intended Impact Areas**

With the above direction in mind, there are two main areas of desired social impact for The Natural Step over the next five years, both of which we believe to be crucial for accelerating the transition to sustainability.

### **1. *Enabling collaboration***

The Natural Step Canada will put our value proposition in service of systems-level collaboration primarily through our Sustainability Transition Lab initiative that we have been developing with support from the Catherine Donnelly Foundation. Over the past year, we've conversed with prospective partners, formed an Advisory Council, learned from "best and next practices," and connected with potential funding partners. We've also prototyped a small number of initiatives to test and develop elements of the Sustainability Transition Lab design in multi-stakeholder contexts of differing scope (e.g., sector, region, community system), and in ways that model the collaborative approach we aim to help foster.

Our experience reinforces that in order for the important actors in any system to be committed to making the changes necessary for a transition toward sustainability, they have to be involved in visioning, analysis, community building, strategizing, and action planning along the way. It is through the process of doing this work together that assumptions are surfaced and challenged, commitment is grown and nurtured, and ownership over the process and outcomes is built. To actually accomplish systemic change, the process is equally as important as the product or plan. The Sustainability Transition Lab design incorporates these lessons.

Through the Sustainability Transition Lab we endeavor to:

- Introduce a powerful collaborative model for systemic change and sustainability-driven innovation in Canada.
- Strengthen the capacity of networks of stakeholders to respond to the complexity of the sustainability challenge and create the conditions for a transition to sustainability to occur.
- Foster ways of working together to create solutions that address the root causes of pressing sustainability challenges.
- Experiment with different approaches, generate learning, and share the best ideas to inspire others.



Each Sustainability Transition Lab will be:

- Aimed at addressing concrete barriers to sustainability in the system that cannot be addressed by any single organization.
- Focused on generating tangible, recognizable, breakthrough results.
- Co-designed and co-delivered with strategic partners that are influential in the system and have a stake in its long term success and viability.
- Supported by multiple stakeholders and leaders from within the system.
- Facilitated to involve diverse stakeholders with the will to act and the capacity to influence.

We foresee that a Lab can be applied in a range of contexts. A Lab may be targeted at stakeholders in a given community/region to co-ordinate collective action to address a regional sustainability issue. In this case the primary partner may be the local government and/or other regional stakeholders. A Lab may also be targeted at an industry sector to help it develop a collective sustainability vision and collaborative solutions to address systemic challenges. In this case, the primary partners may be an industry association and its members and other stakeholders. A Lab may also be focused to help an organization convene its value chain to address sustainability challenges that it cannot address alone. Or it could be broadly focused to help a group of organizations that normally don't work together come together to address a sustainability issue.

The criteria for determining where TNS will focus are:

1. The relevance of “backcasting from sustainability principles” for resolving the issue (i.e. TNS core competency)
2. The readiness of the system/sector for this kind of engagement\*

\*Readiness can be assessed using the following sub-criteria:

- *Openness to change*: Either the status quo is uncomfortable enough, or the business case (i.e. risks and opportunities) compelling enough, that there is significant will among stakeholders to embrace change.
- *Engaged stakeholders*: There are highly engaged stakeholders who want change.
- *Clear problem “owner(s)”*: There is one stakeholder (or more) who can represent the system and serve as a convening partner(s).
- *Need for a structured process*: There is a clear sense that the issue cannot be addressed by the actions of any single organization – i.e. it requires collaboration. There may be a feeling of being “stuck” in the way things are done - stakeholders are in entrenched positions.



- *Need for a common united goal:* There is a sense that better alignment among stakeholders would benefit the system as a whole.
- *Deep understanding of the un-sustainability of the status quo:* There are enough people within the system who have a deep understanding of the un-sustainability of the status quo.

This initiative is a collective impact partnership strategy for The Natural Step Canada, creating opportunities to combine our competencies with the strengths of other organizations. Going forward, key partners will include strategic conveners, funders, Lab participants, researchers, NGOs, communications experts, and media.

Finally, as this work becomes a more primary focus of our organization going forward, we will seek to adapt and integrate some of our existing programs to align with this work. While Sustainability Transition Labs will be our primary focus for enabling collaboration, we will also remain open to other types of collective impact projects where our unique value proposition can be of service.

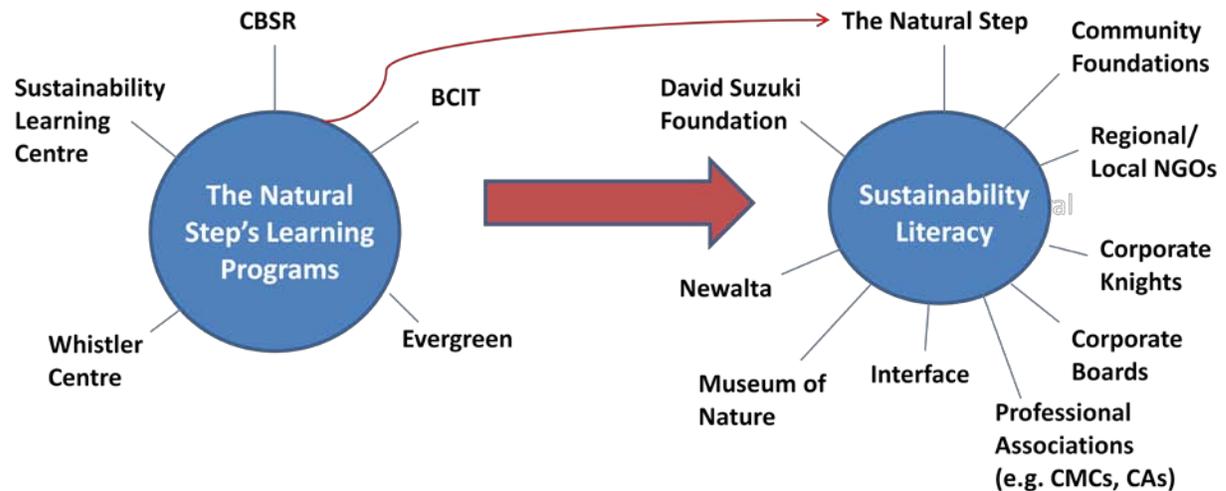
## **2. Building sustainability literacy**

Systems change requires improved rates of sustainability literacy – both to compel individuals and organizations to collaborate and to make that collaboration more effective. As hard as it is for those of us who work in this field to believe, many more people need to realize the seriousness of the sustainability crisis we face, the integrated nature of our social, environmental and economic challenges, and the fundamentals of sustainability science. Sustainability professionals still operate in a relatively small bubble of like-minded individuals and/or face major challenges in engaging their colleagues, customers, employees, investors and others who are often not as sustainability literate.

This is The Natural Step's core capability. Through our learning programs and within our advisory service engagements, we have proven over the years to be extremely effective at helping individuals with diverse worldviews to see the sustainability challenge differently and to understand its relevance to them. Our strength in this realm is fundamental to any license to lead that we may wish to claim around collaboration and collective impact on sustainability issues.



Sustainability literacy is also a fine example of where The Natural Step can provide issue leadership and build partnerships and coalitions. Doing so requires that we shift from viewing our existing learning programs as the starting point for relationship-building and instead focus on providing leadership on the broader issue of building sustainability literacy in order to compel and support collaboration for systems change. In doing so, we will put our learning programs and core capability in the service of a bigger collective mandate. (Note, some of the partners listed in the figure are hypothetical. The figure is meant to be illustrative of the potential.)



Practically, this means that we will seek partnerships that will create opportunities to build sustainability literacy in strategic domains, such as professional associations, corporate boards, and in certain high-profile public contexts. Our contribution to these partnerships will be the FSSD and the related learning tools and resources that we can draw from and create, as well as The Natural Step brand. We will also be guided by the collective impact philosophy in how we develop the model for delivering the Natural Step courses, for example by creating real opportunity for regional and local NGOs to benefit by offering the courses in their communities.



## **Big Hairy Audacious Goals**

### **1. *Enabling Collaboration***

By the end of 2017, we aim to have played an important role in at least 4 tangible, demonstrated breakthrough results toward sustainability being achieved through multi-stakeholder collaboration.

- These may take the form of changes in public policy or resource flows, new programs or initiatives, new standards or partnerships, or game-changing new business models.
- We will know we have achieved this if these breakthrough results can clearly be attributed (at least partially) to the Sustainability Transition Lab or some other intervention of The Natural Step.
- One specific example where we plan to proactively lead the collaborative effort to achieve the desired breakthrough result is the development of a gold standard for sustainable business endorsed by major players;
- We also aim to achieve at least one breakthrough result each:
  - in a community context, for example by helping a group of organizations address some regional sustainability issue that no single organization could address alone;
  - on a sectoral scale, for example by helping an industry association engage its value chain to move the sector toward sustainability or by enabling collaboration among industry players to overcome a specific systemic sustainability challenge facing the sector.

### **2. *Building Sustainability Literacy***

By the end of 2017, we will have worked with other partners to raise the rates of sustainability literacy in Canada, both generally and with specific strategic audiences. We will develop goals for sustainability literacy in conjunction with our partners. Our starting point for that collective goal-setting exercise will be our ambition to:

- give over 1 million Canadians a paradigm-changing learning experience of some kind based on the FSSD;
- provide strategic sustainability training for more than 1000 corporate directors and/or elected officials;
- see at least 3 professional associations integrating the FSSD into their professional training.
- see our Level 1 course offered by partners in more than 30 cities across Canada.



## KEY STRATEGIC TRANSITIONS (i.e. WHAT WILL CHANGE)

In order to realize our strategic objectives over the next five years in a way that builds our organizational resilience, The Natural Step Canada will undertake some key strategic transitions in the programs we offer, our structure and business model, and our internal processes and competencies.

### **Programs and Services**

- Place primary focus on initiating and supporting multi-stakeholder collaborative projects where our unique value proposition is needed (e.g. Sustainability Transition Labs and other collective impact projects that enable collaboration for systems change);
- Where possible, gradually align other existing programs (e.g. Sustainability Leadership Bootcamps) with Sustainability Transition Lab and collective impact work, for example by offering sustainability learning programs that build “strategic sustainability” competency to support systems change;
- Lessen our strategic focus on advisory services to private clients;
- Develop a new partnership-based model for the delivery of our Level 1 course to encourage a much broader participation and impact; continue to offer our Level 2 course;
- Develop other strategic initiatives to build sustainability literacy;
- Phase out The Natural Step Exchange as a program offering.

### **Structure and Business Model**

- Build a thriving network of Natural Step associates that becomes the main source of delivery support for our programs, including almost all advisory services to private clients;
- Focus the core of the organization on the intended impact areas in this strategic plan;
- Lessen the dependence of the core organization on a “billable hours” business model; instead relying more heavily on a mix of revenue streams including funded Sustainability Transition Lab projects, learning program revenue, fundraising, and revenue-sharing with associates.



**Internal Processes and Competencies**

- Focus the core of the organization on two primary processes: fostering creative and strategic partnerships and networks, and sharing learning and impact.
- Make a significant investment in our capacity to evaluate and communicate impact.
- Place a major emphasis on building brand and issue awareness
- Develop and nurture excellence in facilitation, learning design, advisory and FSSD expertise through a thriving network of Natural Step associates