

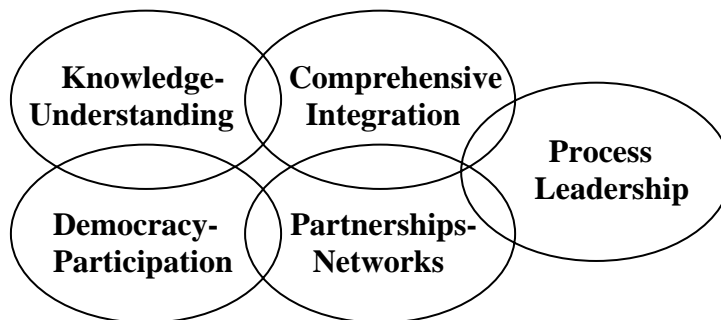
The Theoretical Model of Sustainable Robertsfors

The Project, Sustainable Robertsfors, is a five-year project started in August 2001 and will, by the end of 2006, lay the foundation for sustainable development in the municipality of Robertsfors. The project is financed by the European Union, the municipality of Robertsfors and also by the administrative board and county council of Västerbotten.

The main task for the project is to develop methods that can constitute a model for other municipalities wishing to work successfully with sustainable development. This is done by spreading knowledge of sustainability; increasing the means by which citizens can participate; increasing the means by which sustainability can be an integral part of community development; developing and working closely in, with and through networks; and ensuring there is process leadership for the project.

What can a community expect to accomplish in five years? Any community initiating a sustainable community development or eco-municipality project based on this model can expect, within a five-year period, to have an action plan, and implementation system and many good examples of sustainable community programs in place by the end of this period. You can also expect that this model will produce a sustainable and democratic, ongoing planning and decision-making process to be in place for the community in the long-term.

The Linchpins of Sustainable Robertsfors



These five parts of the Robertsfors process model have complemented each other and are equally important for success. They must happen concurrently and comprehensively, and it is through the process leader that this is ensured. These five linchpins are explained in detail below, and a few other concepts are described as well that are central to the sustainable community process, including “good examples” and “sustainable action plans”.

Knowledge-Insight

This refers to awareness and understanding of the global threats of today and the causal factors behind these threats, as well as knowledge of the conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to create a long-term sustainable future. These criteria include an ecological-, economical-, and a psychosocial aspect. Here we also find a concept of the world that emphasises quality of life and the basic needs of humans. *The Compass* is the methodology

developed by The Natural Step and used by Sustainable Robertsfors. It involves the following four steps:

- A. Understand the conditions for sustainability
- B. Take an inventory of the present situation with an overall view
- C. Formulate a sustainable vision
- D. Draw up the plan of action that will lead us from B to C

Understanding and planning for the conditions for sustainability can be accomplished by using the *Four System-Conditions*:

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

- System-condition 1: ...concentrations of substances extracted from the earth’s crust.
System-condition 2: ...concentrations of substances produced by society.
System-condition 3: ...degradations by physical means.

And in that society...

- System-condition 4: ...people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.” (The Natural Step)

The Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef’s concept is used as a way of describing what we mean by needs. Max-Neef has identified *nine human basic needs* that are the same independent of time and culture.

Nine Human Basic Needs (Manfred Max-Neef):

- permanence/subsistence
- protection
- affection
- understanding
- participation
- leisure
- creation
- identity
- freedom

The Natural Step concept, including Max-Neef’s needs theory, is expressed in a special educational material used in the Robertsfors project called “The Agenda 21 Guide”. Trainings have been held for different target groups within the community: politicians, local government employees, school personnel, business people, youngsters, etc. When people from different groups in the society are speaking “the same language” and able to share experiences, the project benefits, it is easier to initiate the project and much is won in the ongoing process.

Democracy-Participation

A deep democratic process is one of the main aims of the project, and at the same time, such democracy is an absolutely necessary condition for a successful process of change. The

project is therefore trying new methods to strengthen the ability of people to participate – to become empowered. The ambition is to always invite people and give them space to participate in the process.

There are two aspects to developing a more democratic and participatory society – one is to alter the *form* of municipal participation by changing the way the municipality is organized, or altering policies and increasing opportunities for citizen input. One initiative, for example, is a special method for meetings – *the synergy method* – used experimentally in the Robertsfors project to increase participation, equity and democracy in meetings. Other examples used in the Robertsfors project are invitations for citizen proposals and the decentralization of decision-making processes to village development groups and, possibly in the future, community businesses.

The other aspect that needs to be addressed is less tangible but equally important: the *content*, or culture and behaviour within the society or community. It is more difficult to see, it is something sensed or known in the community. There should be efforts to move away from the “we” and “them” thinking inherent in many municipalities and move towards trust and participation.

Partnerships-Networks

An important part of the project is helping the people throughout the community realize that the municipality of Robertsfors cannot work in isolation from the rest of the world. On the contrary, it is a condition of a successful process to actively and intensely seek contact with local-, regional-, national- and international operators.

Our municipality has already had visits from several international groups, thanks to the project. It is both a great opportunity and an obligation to share experiences and examples with other communities and organizations. If the project and the municipality are going to be interesting for our partners to visit and learn from in the future, the project has to succeed with the changing process that it has started. This will also increase the possibilities to develop new, international projects. For everyone that is engaged in the project, the international elements are already a great source of inspiration.

Integration – Overall View

A starting point for the project is to work with many target groups at the same time (local enterprise, the local municipal organisation, schools and child care, educational associations, youths, government authorities, etc.), integrating understanding and planning into all groups within the community at the same time. The fundamental idea is to secure a foothold for the sustainable perspective so the ideas will be spread into all target groups. A democratic and communicative perspective, as well as environmental and public health perspectives and an overall view of the world should permeate all activities. In this way a process has started, where everybody starts to speak the same language, creating new ideas and using new terms, independent of where in the society one may stand.

Process Leadership

It is important to have someone trained in leading such a process that can provide project coordination, inspiration, and constant evaluation to ensure the project is headed towards its overall goal. This process leader (or leaders) can also provide leadership training to members of the community in order to build knowledge capacity for the community. The process leader may be from within the community or from outside the community; in the case of Robertsfors, the project has contracted Torbjörn Lahti to lead this process.

Process leaders need to be skilled in the following five areas, based on the model developed by Carl-Henrik Robert.

Five Process Levels Needed by Process Leader:

- Systems
- Successes
- Strategies
- Actions
- Tools

They need to understand systems, have a comprehensive knowledge of ecology and systems-thinking; understand the existing successes of the system they're working in and understand the system conditions that lead to success and sustainability; be aware of different strategies and appropriate solutions for different situations; know the kinds of actions possible, such as planning techniques; and have a host of tools to use in planning and taking action, such as an understanding of tools such as management systems, ecological footprints, or community business associations. Process leaders also need to be knowledgeable about networking, and they should have a deep understanding of the Robertsfors model in order to continue the model development and improvement process.

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Good Examples

Experience shows that the credibility of a process is enhanced when relatively fast, quality and concrete examples can be shown early on in the process. Even if the most important changes are the ones that take place internally (our attitudes and behaviours), it is not until there is visible proof of the change that people start to really believe it is possible to change their society and then also the whole world. In the very early stages of our project, we observed that the municipality of Robertsfors had several good examples, including active village communities, ecological farmers, sustainable schools and childcare centres – all working for sustainable development in an exemplary manner.

Since those early days, the increase in the number of new good examples is due in part to the great variety of ideas that have arisen during the process, but most of all these new good examples are due to all the community "firespirits" who have the strength to bring new ideas to reality.

Sustainable Action Programs

The forces of the project are at work to engage as many as possible of the involved operators, and to develop operating systems and long term action programs directed at increasing community-wide sustainability. Schools and childcare centres have already started the work towards sustainable management systems. Ten or more local businesses are working towards special management systems that involve environmental-, quality- and working environmental aspects. The same effort is made towards the local municipal organisation, the environmental objectives and public health.

Capacity Centre

A part of the Robertsfors model is to ensure that communities that go through the process become a capacity centre, a resource within its own community as well as a resource for other communities. The capacity centre should provide continued evaluation of the process, networking at the local, regional, national and international levels, and trainings based on the local knowledge that was developed through the eco-municipality process. Process knowledge and experience should be passed on to others; process leadership trainings, system conditions trainings and other trainings to pass on this knowledge should be a service provided by the community through some kind of capacity centre, such as a community business. This is an opportunity that every community that goes through a sustainable development process should not miss, as the knowledge is a valuable resource that once lost is difficult to regain.

For more information, visit us on the web at www.robertsfors.se

Or visit with us in person on a Sustainable Sweden Tour! www.sustainablesweden.org