

The Natural Step

During the mid-1990s The Natural Step became known as a set of system conditions derived from nature which could be used to develop a general framework for sustainability based upon a basic understanding of “what makes life possible, how our biosphere functions and how we are part of the earth’s natural systems.” Since that time The Natural Step has become an international not-for-profit organization with chapters in many countries to promote education, advisory work and research into sustainable development.

Originally, Dr. Karl-Henrik Robert, a Swedish physician worked with colleagues during the late 1980s to postulate the four system conditions below, which were re-worked into the four accompanying principles of sustainability. These principles have subsequently driven a Framework for Sustainability to engage businesses, governments and communities to vision, plan and implement what sustainability can mean to an organization and its operations.

Four System Conditions	Reworked As the Four Principles of Sustainability
In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systemically increasing	To become a sustainable society we must
1. concentrations of substances extracted from earth’s crust	1. eliminate our contribution to the progressive build-up of substances extracted from earth’s crust (for example, fossil fuels and haz waste)
2. concentrations of substances produced by society	2. eliminate our contribution to the progressive build-up of chemicals and compounds produced by society
3. degradation by physical means	3. eliminate our contribution to the progressive physical degradation and destruction of nature and natural processes (for example, overharvesting forests and paving over of wildlife habitat)
4. and, in that society, people are not subject to conditions that systemically undermine their capacity to meet their needs	4. eliminate our contributions to conditions that undermine people’s capacity to meet their basic human needs (for example, unsafe working conditions and not enough pay to live on)

