

UDC 351

**IMPLEMENTATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS:
THE MISSING LINK**

BARBARA A COE

Western Washington University, Huxley School of the Environment

Despite the seriousness of worldwide social, economic and environmental crises and myriad efforts to counter them through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), too little is being achieved. The greatest challenge is that of implementation in this most complex endeavor involving local, national and international governmental institutions and the public sector, both for-profit and not-for-profit. Research and practice, described in three case studies, demonstrate that an underlying structural foundation either aids or limits the implementation of SDGs in this multi-sector environment. Implementation requires a structure that fosters advancement rather than the all-too common oscillating pattern. This structure consists of a shared desired end result (not focus on a problem) and shared understanding of the actual reality relative to the desired end result to energize and mobilize effective actions. When leaders and actors understand the limitations and opportunities of this model, and apply the lessons, they will be able to achieve greater success in implementing the SDGs.

Keywords: community, leadership, sustainable development.

Implementation of the SDGs: the Missing Link

Why, despite the seriousness of the worldwide social, economic and environmental crises and myriad efforts to address sustainable development goals (SDGs), is success so elusive? Experts acknowledge the difficulty of implementation in this most complex, multi-sector arena; they cite the lack of political will. They call upon all levels of government to lead the way. However, the development of political will and implementation is limited by the underlying foundation of decision-making and action. (Fritz 1996) The underlying foundation can produce a pattern of either advancement toward a goal or a pattern of oscillation, back and forth, toward and away from a goal. Unfortunately, oscillation is currently an all-too-common pattern in efforts to implement sustainable development goals. Understanding how to create an appropriate underlying foundation can change the pattern to motivate forward action and successful implementation.

This paper describes the theoretical basis of structural dynamics that explains failure and success in achieving goals, illustrating it with empirical examples in such diverse localities as Albania, Uganda, the United States, and Vietnam. It explains how, without an appropriate structural foundation, failure is nearly guaranteed. Then, it explains how to put into place a structural foundation designed for advancement. It is a proactive approach, such as used by private business and not-for-profit organizations, not the reactive, problem-focused one that is often used in international development, including even the SDGs.

With an appropriate structural foundation, implementation of the SDGs can advance rapidly. Thus, application of this approach can make a major contribution to successful implementation of the SDGs.

Structural Dynamics

In attempts to implement goals, understanding of structural dynamics is a major factor in success or failure. (Fritz 1996). In particular, an underlying structure of decision-making and action guides the direction of action, either advancement toward the goal or oscillation, back and forth toward and away from the goal. (Coe 2017; Fritz 1996) This structure consists of both the organization of the process and the thinking of the leaders and actors. A structure designed to produce a pattern of advancement consists simply of a clear vision of the desired end result (that is, the outcome or what the goal is intended to achieve) and clear understanding of the current reality relative to the goal, shared by those involved. These two in juxtaposition, produce “structural tension,” which generates energy that mobilizes advancement toward the goal. Then groups can experiment with actions and evaluate whether they are making progress.

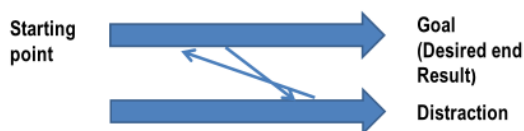
Structural tension contains energy that propels us forward



General pattern of movement
is forward

This seemingly simple model is little understood and rarely applied appropriately, however. As a result, when implementing complex goals in a complex arena involving many actors, such as the SDGs, the structure often produces a pattern of oscillation. Three main reasons account for the inability to establish an effective structural foundation for advancement toward implementation: 1. Competing goals, 2. Misconstruing the goals, and 3. Misconstruing the current reality. These conditions produce structural conflict, rather than structural tension.

Contrasts with structural conflict



**General pattern of movement
is oscillation**

Implementation Failure from Lack of a Shared Vision

Some common errors often thwart this deceptively simple model. First is the failure to put forth a shared, specific and positive goal or desired end result.

The existence of competing goals is one reason that the structure produces a pattern of oscillation: some critical decision makers are attempting to achieve one goal while others strive to achieve a conflicting one. For example, in the area of climate change, some groups seek to combat climate change while others deny any human influence on climate change and push against any action, as is happening currently in the US Federal government. This creates a “structural conflict” in which action is taken first in one direction and then (by others) in the opposite direction, in a pattern of oscillation. Within this structure, political will for policy change is doomed.

Although finding shared desired end results in a climate of conflict and suspicion may seem a futile task (and sometimes is), very often groups can and do come together around desired end results. Disputes most often stem from lack of clarity about the current reality and each group’s insistence that the actions they propose are the right ones rather than from lack of agreement about the desired end results. When people who truly care about the results open their minds, they often find their share a great deal with so-called opponents. The current battle over immigration into the United States is a prime example of failure of decision makers to focus on what could be a shared desired end: for example an orderly, peaceful and manageable immigration process and also failure to consider the reality of root causes of the migration, simply insisting upon actions without any basis. This approach merely creates oscillation and stalemate.

Such goal conflict even occurs within groups that start out with the same primary goal but get diverted, often by disagreement about how to achieve the goal. For example, one group became distracted from its primary goal of achieving a sustainable Colorado, focusing its energy instead upon how to organize, becoming bogged down by conflicting views. Had they recognized what was happening, they could have continued to work toward the primary goal, while also seeking a mutually-acceptable way of organizing. Instead, the secondary goal took over and the group ultimately disbanded. (Coe 2017)

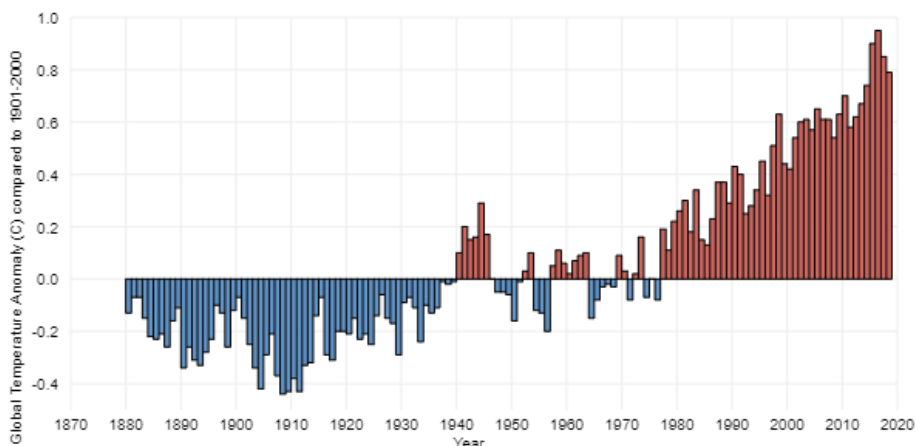
Another instance is when groups begin to focus on the short term rather than the long term that is required to achieve many of the SDGs.

Misconstruing the goal is another critical factor in failure to apply this model and advance toward success. Principles of structural dynamics show that, to build this structure requires that actors first have a clear, specific, positive desired end result. (Fritz, 1996) That is, what will be in place when the goal is achieved? Very often stated goals are not end results but rather, problems to eliminate. A problem-focused approach leads in a circular pattern rather than in a forward motion. When groups feel relief from a problem because of action, they then relax and take less action. Without a clear desired end result, action ceases when parties feel relief. An analysis of a case of gang violence in Denver, Colorado, USA showed that the city's multiple attempts to fight against the problem of gang violence each resulted in relief for a period of time, then violence inevitably resumed. (Philips 2016 in Coe 2017)

PROBLEM FOCUS LEADS IN CIRCLES



Also, stating goals as processes or actions rather than as desired end results stymies the use of the model, which requires a clear mental image of the outcome. (Fritz 1996) For example, SDG Number 13, “Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts” is a statement of a process or action, rather than a desired end result. Because the statement lacks a mental picture of the end result, it cannot help to generate the motivating energy. A more effective, clear, positive statement of a desired end result would be something like: “a stable planetary climate at the 1976 level,” before the temperature started to rise rapidly, as shown on the following graph. (Lindsay and Dahlman 2018).



Change in Global Temperature over Time

Source: Lindsay and Dahlman 2018.

In Albania, in the project, Communities Engaged in Social and Economic Development of Albania (CESEDA) groups in 50 villages were asked to indicate their desired end results and priorities. At first, they were vague, for example, calling for “good roads,” too vague a statement to be useful. When they were guided further, to identify clear, specific, positive end results they specified such goals as: “roads passable in all types of weather to enable transport to schools, jobs and markets.” A statement of such clear desired ends was the first step in motivating communities who had never before engaged in self-help (in fact, having for 50 years been forbidden to do so in the most restrictive Communist dictatorship). (Coe 2017)

Implementation Failure from Lack of a Shared Understanding of Current Reality

In order to generate energy that mobilizes and sustains action, decision makers must also have a clear, accurate picture of the current reality. However, statements about current reality are often distorted, either purposely, often for political gains, or inadvertently. For example, in the current political climate, the US Administration denies any human influence on global climate change, despite agreement by 97 percent of scientists, including those of the US Government, that greenhouse gases spewed into the atmosphere from industrial sources are a major cause. (NASA 2019) Furthermore, the Administration insists that transition to clean energy would cost “million and millions” of jobs. However, energy efficiency is the fastest growing job-creating sector. (Environmental Entrepreneurs 2019)

Another common distortion of the current reality occurs when parties lack information or data, so they fill in the void with opinion or ideology. This often happens when forecasting future events in the light of less than perfect understanding or expertise. A prime example is the claim that lowering the tax rate on the wealthiest trickles down to middle- and low-income people

and produces more tax revenue. However, analysis showed no such result. (Amadeo 2018)

Another source of distortion is lack of understanding of the difference between correlation and causal relationships. Many people are refusing to vaccinate their children because of a correlation between vaccination and autism in a very small percentage of children. Medical researchers attribute this to the fact that vaccinations and the onset of autism occur at about the same age. (Doja and Roberts 2014) As a result of this lack of understanding, many children are being put at risk of illness or death from diseases thought to have been eradicated.

Vagueness about the current reality also limits the ability to stimulate action. For example, in Albania, communities first characterized roads as “bad.” This is too vague to be useful in stimulating or organizing action. When guided to do so, they indicated more specifically: “roads with deteriorating pavement, full of potholes, often impassable in winter weather.” (Coe 2017)

People often want to substitute predictions about the future for current reality. They are sure that the worst or the best will happen given certain actions. Or they explain how things got the way they are. This is not current reality. This step in the model requires simply a statement of what is known about what IS, nothing more, nothing less.

Sometimes decision makers will stick to their distortions of current reality in order to achieve their political or economic goals. However, decision makers who have a genuine interest in the wellbeing of the community will be amenable to working with others to achieve shared clarity about the desired end results and the current reality. Even groups with a history of conflict often find this clarity that leads to common ground.

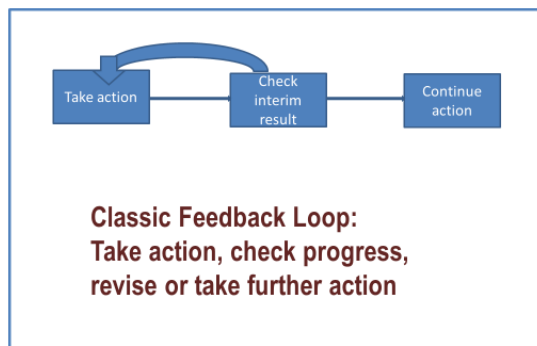
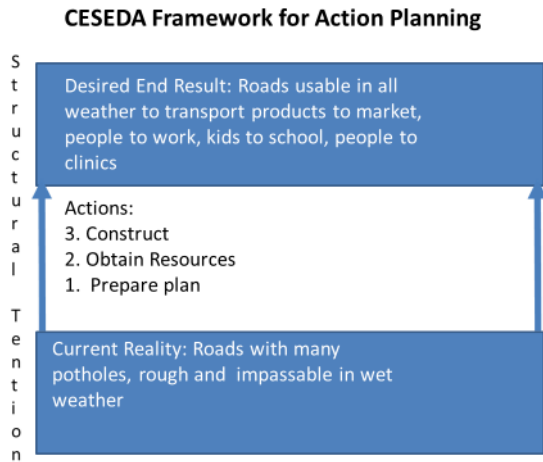
Energy and Action-generating Structure

As discussed above, when leaders and actors identify both a shared, clear, specific, positive desired end result and an accurate picture of the current reality relative to that desired end result, a kind of tension, called structural tension, automatically occurs. This tension is the engine the mobilizes and sustains progress. Groups find that when they keep this model in mind, they can consistently advance.

With this structural tension in place, groups then identify 3 or 4 broad actions that seem likely to lead to the goal. Each of these is then broken down into smaller steps. As they take the steps, they then evaluate whether they are advancing in the desired direction or not. If not, they can try other options and then evaluate them. Completion and successes are acknowledged and celebrated, generating still more energy for advancement toward the goals.

CESEDA used this approach in a very successful two-year project in Albania. (Coe 2017) We initially trained field coordinators, who formed four male/female teams of two to work in each of four Communes. The teams then gathered groups (with members self-selecting), beginning with suggestions by local leaders such as heads of schools or health clinics. After

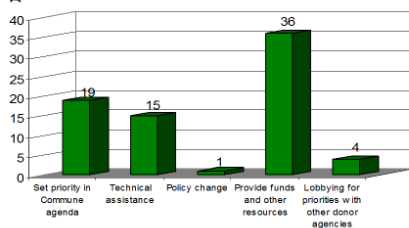
an initial “report card” assessment of local governmental services, they asked the participants to identify which services were their priorities. Priorities ranged from roads to bridges to schools, health clinics and sewage treatment, even a cemetery. Then field coordinators guided the villages to describe the desired end results and the current reality relative to those results for each priority, helping them be more specific and accurate. Next, they guided the development of broad actions to lead to the desired end results as shown on the following chart.



One necessary action was usually to contact local or regional officials. People often resisted this, indicating that “they officials already know what we need; they won’t listen anyway; they won’t help.” (Coe 2017) This was a clear case of misunderstanding of current reality, based upon assumptions. When coordinators helped them see that this was only conjecture, not fact, and that the only way they could know the response was to meet with the officials, groups finally picked a few people to visit the officials. Field coordinators guided the emissaries to begin the conversations by asking the officials what if anything was planned for the village and only then to share their community’s priority and assessment. They were very surprised by the response, with public officials nearly always offering some type of support.

Albanian Officials' Response to Villager Input

Local and Central Government responded to 52% of priorities presented in the Report Card



With the residents doing much of the labor, the 50 villages were able to complete 58 major improvements such as the following:

New Road in Golem



New Bridge in Kocaj, Baldushk



This model was also the basis for a four-year, four-province project in Vietnam for sustainable agriculture and forestry in Vietnam uplands. Funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and implemented by the firm, Swedforest, for which I was a consultant and trainer, we first trained

teams comprised of Vietnamese agriculture and forestry professionals and Swedish consultants. The teams then met with villagers in each province to elicit input concerning their desired end results and assessment of the relevant current reality. Then they prepared an initial regional development plan reflecting this input. By capturing the desires and knowledge of the villagers in a bottom-up process, the project was able to tap the energy of the local people, whose actions would be necessary for implementation success. (Lindahl, etal June 2003.)

Another example of successful use of this model is the Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT), which “empowers marginalized people in rural areas of Uganda by focusing on the ‘missing link’ in development programs. URDT uses a people-centered approach by combining rural development projects with consciousness raising, training, education and information sharing to facilitate integrated, self-directed, and sustainable development in surrounding communities. The program, established in 1987, has steadily grown, now operating out of multiple centers to train hundreds of citizens, mainly children and women to create sustainable development. (Center for Education Innovations undated).

URDT development efforts (and indeed those of any using this model) are based on the following working premises:

- The people of Uganda, like all the people in the world are KEY to their own development
 - People with common vision can transcend traditional barriers and prejudice caused by tribal, religious, political and gender differences and work together to achieve that which is truly important to them all.
 - People have innate power and wisdom which they can tap to transform the quality of their life and that of their communities
 - Lasting change comes only as people shift from reacting or adapting to circumstances to being the creators of their desired circumstances
 - Training, education and information sharing are integral components of development as gained knowledge and skills allow people to meet exigencies of rural life.

(Elimu Foundation website undated)

Using Structural Dynamics for Implementation Success

As shown in the three diverse examples, informed use of structural dynamics can have a profound effect on whether goals are implemented or not. Deceptively simple, it differs from common approaches in several major ways:

1. It emphasizes the necessity of focusing on a clear, positive, genuinely-desired and shared desired end result, as would a business, rather than focusing on a problem.
2. It recognizes that success is nearly impossible when significant parties pull and push against each other. Although finding a shared vision among diverse parties can be challenging, parties who genuinely seek to

achieve a goal usually find that they have in common many desired end results.

3. It stresses the necessity of clarity and accuracy about the current reality relative to the goal. Unfortunately, this step is often skipped altogether in planning, with groups operating overtly from completely different understanding of the current situation, assets and barriers. Lacking this step, what actions to take will be unclear and parties will be unable to apply principles of structural dynamics.

4. It reveals the little-known but powerful structural tension which generates energy to energize, mobilize and sustain action. At the same time, it recognizes that conflicting goals and or misrepresentation of current reality will interfere with the ability to establish and use that structural tension and lead to a pattern of oscillation that achieves nothing.

5. It treats actions as experiments, not as an unalterable plan, thus providing the flexibility to adjust actions while keeping eyes on the desired end result and refining the picture of the current reality, as it changes following action.

Conclusion: What the Model can Mean

These three cases have demonstrated the efficacy of using principles of structural dynamics to achieve sustainable development goals in vastly different cultures. Other examples reveal the oscillation that occurs when the underlying structure is one that supports only oscillation, rather than continuous advancement, showing why implementation of SDGs is often so limited.

Many parties have a strong commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals; success can be vastly enhanced through understanding and application of principles of structural dynamics. The model could be further tested on a small scale in various communities in diverse localities and then scaled up. The difference in the implementation success rate could be profound.

REFERENCES

Amadeo, Kimberly. 2018. Why Trickle Down Economic Works in Theory But Not in Fact: When Trickle-Down Economics Works. *The Balance*. Retrieved at: <https://www.thebalance.com/trickle-down-economics-theory-effect-does-it-work-3305572>

Center for Education Innovations. Undated. Uganda Rural Development and Training Program (URDT) Retrieved at: <https://educationinnovations.org/program/uganda-rural-development-and-training-programme-urdt>

Coe, Barbara. 2017. *Engaging Community Hearts, Minds and Spirit: Leadership for a Sustainable World*. CreateSpace. US.

Doja, Asif and Wendy Roberts. 2006. Immunizations and Autism: A Review of the Literature. (Volume 33, Issue 4, November 2006: pp. 34-346.) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S031716710000528X>. Published online: 02 December 2014

Retrieved at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/canadian-journal-of-neurological-sciences/article/immunizations-and-autism-a-review-of-the-literature/16B999364BFFD9F0DA3B09F25C1DE28C>

Elimu Foundation website (undated) <http://elimufoundation.org/index.php/urdt>

Environmental entrepreneurs (E2) Clean Jobs America. 2019. (March 13, 2019) Retrieved at <https://www.e2.org/reports/clean-jobs-america-2019/>

Fritz, Robert. 1996. *Corporate Tides: The Inescapable Laws of Organizational Structure*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Lindahl, Claes, et al. 2003. Of Trees and People... An Evaluation of the Vietnam-Sweden Forestry Cooperation Programme and the Mountain Rural Development Programme in the Northern Uplands 1991–2000. Department for Natural Resources and the Environment Sida Evaluation 01/34. Retrieved at https://www.sida.se/contentassets/a966f90be1804c049167a87009b3ab42/of-trees-and-people...-an-evaluation-of-the-vietnam-sweden-forestry-cooperation-programme-and-the-mountain-rural-development-p_2246.pdf.

Lindsey, Rebecca and LuAnn Dahlman. 2018. Climate Change: Global Temperature. NOAA. Climate.gov. (August 1, 2018) (<https://www.climate.gov/news-features/understanding-climate/climate-change-global-temperature>)

NASA. Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet. Retrieved at: <https://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>

**ԿԱՅՈՒՆ ԶԱՐԳԱՑՄԱՆ ՆՊԱՏԱԿՆԵՐԻ ԻՐԱԿԱՆԱՑՈՒՄ.
ԲԱՑԱԿԱՅՈՂ ԿԱՊԸ
ԲԱՐԲԱՐԱ ՔՈՈՒ**

Արևմտյան Վաշինգտոնի համալսարան, Հաքսլի շրջակա միջավայրի դպրոց

Չնայած համաշխարհային սոցիալական, տնտեսական և բնապահպանական ճգնաժամերի լրջությանը և կայուն զարգացման նպատակներով (ԿՁՆ) դրանց հակազդելու անհամար ջանքերին՝ ձեռքբերումը չափազանց փոքր է: Մեծագույն մարտահրավերն իրականացումն է այս ամենախրթին ջանքերի, որոնցում ներգրավված են տեղական, ազգային և միջազգային կառավարական հաստատությունները և ինչպես շահույթ հետապնդող, այնպես էլ շահույթ չհետապնդող հանրային հատվածը: Երեք իրավիճակային խնդիրներում նկարագրված հետազոտություններն ու փորձը ցույց են տալիս, որ կառուցվածքի հիմքը կամ օժանդակում կամ սահմանափակում է ԿՁՆ-ի իրականացումն այս բազմաճյուղ միջավայրում: Իրականացումը պահանջում է մի կառուցվածք, որը խթանում է առաջխաղացումը, այլ ոչ թե՛ լայն տարածում ունեցող փխրուն մոդելը: Այս կառուցվածքը բաղկացած է փոխանցվող ցանկալի վերջնարդյունքից (ոչ թե խնդրի վրա կենտրոնացումից) և իրականության փոխանցվող ընկալումից՝ արդյունավետ գործողություններ ակտիվացնելու և արագ տեղաշարժման նպատակով ցանկալի վերջնարդյունքի հետ համեմատությամբ: Երբ առաջնորդներն ու դերակատարները հասկանան այս մոդելի սահմանափակումներն ու հնարավորությունները և կիրառեն դասերը, նրանք ավելի մեծ հաջողության կհասնեն ԿՁՆ-ի իրականացման հարցում:

Բանալի բառեր. համայնք, առաջնորդություն, կայուն զարգացում:

РЕАЛИЗАЦИЯ ЦЕЛЕЙ УСТОЙЧИВОГО РАЗВИТИЯ: НЕДОСТАЮЩЕЕ ЗВЕНО

БАРБАРА А. КОУ

Университет Западного Вашингтона, Школа окружающей среды Хаксли

Несмотря на бесчисленные усилия по противодействию серьезности мирового социального, экономического и экологического кризисов для реализации целей устойчивого развития (ЦУР), достижения чрезвычайно малы. Реализация самых больших вызовов - результат невероятных усилий, куда вовлечены местные, национальные и международные правительственные учреждения и как коммерческий, так и некоммерческий сектор. Исследования и опыт, описанные в трех ситуационных задачах, показывают, что фундамент структуры либо поддерживает, либо ограничивает реализацию ЦУР в этой многоотраслевой среде. Реализация требует такую структуру, которая способствует прогрессу, а не хрупкий модель, имеющий широкое распространение. Эта структура состоит из передаваемого желаемого результата (а не сосредоточения внимания на проблеме) и передаваемого восприятия реальности в сравнении с желаемым результатом с целью активизации и мобилизации эффективных действий. Когда лидеры и участники поймут ограничения и возможности этой модели и применят уроки, они смогут добиться большего успеха в реализации ЦУР.

Ключевые слова: община, лидерство, устойчивое развитие.

*Ներկայացվել է խմբագրություն 10.06.2020
Երաշխավորվել է րւագրության 22.09.2020*