

New research programme for sustainable decision-making

A new research programme, Real Change, is now being launched. It aims to support the world's decision-makers in their promotion of sustainability and at ensuring that their decision-making will rest on scientific foundations leading to – real change.

The initiative comes from the Blekinge Institute of Technology, the Natural Step and Lund University, with the Swedish Energy Agency, Formas (the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning), the National Environmental Protection Agency, Nutek (the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth) and VINNOVA (the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovative Systems) as funding agencies. The kick-off, in Stockholm on 9th May, will be attended by H. M. King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden (patron of The Natural Step), scientists, and representatives of national authorities and the business community.

The wellbeing of society and the natural environment hinges on a swift transition to social and ecological sustainability. No single challenge such as climate change, pollution, destruction of forests, famine or terrorism can be regarded as "biggest", and no challenge can be addressed in isolation from the others. The biggest challenge is that of making firmly based decisions emanating from an understanding of the interrelationships and of the necessity of making each investment lay the foundations of the next one. This can be learned. Real Change is to support the promotion of sustainability, ensure that decisions and policy measures are scientifically based and further develop research in systematic thinking for sustainability.

"Society's transition to sustainability demands and facilitates innovation," says Göran Broman, Professor at the Blekinge Institute of Technology and Real Change's Programme Director. "We need renewal and co-ordination of knowledge, competence, technique, business models and public functions. This is an important growth area, and the purpose of Real Change is to press forward with that kind of innovation for sustainability."

Real Change is based on a methodology of systematic planning for sustainability which The Natural Step initiated at the beginning of the 1990s. The methodology is unique in that it functions as a lingua franca of strategic sustainable development irrespective of activity and scale. More and more are now adopting this working approach. The participants will collaborate on an interdisciplinary and intersectoral basis to develop the methodology and ratchet up co-operation for concrete sustainable development.

"A unique Swedish methodology is now uniting scientists, business enterprise and politicians in a systematic pursuit of sustainability," says Karl-Henrik Robèrt, Chairman of the Real Change Steering Group, Associate Professor at the Blekinge Institute of Technology and founder of The Natural Step.

Real Change is an important cog in the task of proceeding from words to action in environmental co-operation," says Erik Fellenius, Director of Research at the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. "We find something particularly interesting about sustainability research which mobilises a host of agents in the community, thereby contributing towards a holistic view of things."

At the kick-off ceremony, 120 scientists and policy-makers from all over the world will gather to discuss and further develop the methodology which people have already been using in their hundreds of thousands. Five companies (Nike, Scandic, Interface, Aura light, Wallenius Wilhelmsen Logistics) and a region of Canada (Whistler) are among the organisations which will be represented at the kick-off on 9th May. Instead of waiting for better political decisions, they are laying the foundations of them.

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Background

Kick-off for Real Change – Research from words to action

The future welfare of civilisation relies on a rapid adjustment of society to social and ecological sustainability. None of challenges such as climate change, pollution, destruction of forests, famine and terrorism can be regarded as the most important, nor can any of them be dealt with in isolation from the others. The biggest challenge lies in getting enough policy-makers to base decisions on the relationships between problems, relationships between solutions, and approach a clear definition of sustainability in a strategic step-by-step fashion.

Real Change is an interdisciplinary, intersectoral programme which accepts this challenge and is working to co-ordinate the development of theory, methodology and practice for strategic sustainable development. Scientists and policy-makers from all over the world take part in this program. One hundred and twenty of them gather for a kick-off on the launch date, 9th May, in the presence of H. M. King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden.

The initiators

The initiative behind Real Change comes from the Blekinge Institute of Technology (BTH), the Natural Step and Lund University, and the mandators comprise the Swedish Energy Agency, Formas (the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning), the National Environmental Protection Agency, Nutek (the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth) and VINNOVA (the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems). The horizon is 10 years and the external funding agencies have put up a total of MSEK 9 for the first three years. To begin with the initiators will be putting up roughly the same amount of funding. Universities from across the globe are now linking their respective research programs to the Real Change, thereby bringing more and more value to it.

The programme is based on the methodology for systematic sustainability planning which was initiated by The Natural Step at the beginning of the 1990s. This has now grown into an international partnership of scientists and policy-makers. The initiators will be working to refine this methodology, add further effective tools and decision-making support to it, and gear up interdisciplinary and intersectoral co-operation to achieve a Real Change towards sustainability.

The basic methodology

All organisations have their special circumstances and challenges where sustainability is concerned, but on the strength of the latest research they can define the implications of sustainability for themselves. In doing so, they start with a future perspective which is socially, ecologically and economically sustainable, integrate that with their own visions and strategic objectives (or develop such objectives if none have existed hitherto) and then work their way back to the present, identifying subsidiary targets and policy measures.

It is a matter of doing the right thing at the right time. A measure which is complicated and expensive today may be easy to take in a year or so when facilitated by new infrastructure, new research findings or technical progress, and so work begins with picking "low hanging fruit" which at the same time are smart platforms for future investments to realise the sustainable vision.

The experiences of hundreds of thousands of people the world over who have practised different versions of this methodology, parallel to and integrated with its scientific development, make a good foundation for the further development and gearing-up which is now taking place.

The users of this methodology are not waiting for political decisions to adjust to, they are leading developments and benefiting from the competitive advantages and cost savings which the pursuit of sustainability gives them. They are showing others the way already before the big political decisions are made, thereby paving the way for them. Real Change highlights best practices which can inspire others, contributing knowledge and resources, advisors, tools and methods.

"We want to help organisations to succeed better economically, not in spite of showing consideration for social and ecological systems but actually by virtue of so doing," says Karl-Henrik Robèrt, Chairman of the Real Change Steering Group, Adjunct Professor at the Blekinge Institute of Technology and founder of The Natural Step.

"With the scientists and policy-makers in the programme sharing the same basic competence, synergies will be created, and system solutions across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries," says Göran Broman, Professor at the Blekinge Institute of Technology and Real Change Programme Director.

Integration of the basic methodology into thematic fields

As mentioned above the Real Change is not only comprised of a core program founded in Sweden. Added value is brought about by a growing number of thematic research programmes from across the globe, all aligning their research by use of one and the same framework for a systematic approach to sustainability. It all adds up into a "flower", comprised by the core program, and a growing number of "petals". Thematic programmes of this kind include the following:

Product innovation: Prof. Göran Broman, the Blekinge Institute of Technology (Sweden).

Metal and mineral flows in industrial processes: Prof. Harald Sverdrup, Lund University (Sweden).

Metal and mineral flows in society: Prof. Joel Herbertson, Newcastle University (Australia).

Regional planning: Kelly Baxter, The Natural Step (network of local authorities, mainly in Sweden, the USA and Canada).

Eco-efficiency in industrial ecology: Prof. Jouni Korhonen, Åbo University (Finland).

Biomass from algae cultivation, consequences for turnover of energy/materials/carbon: Dr Vladimir Strezov, Macquarie University (Australia).

Health care processes: Dr Marie Elf, Chalmers University of Technology (Sweden).

Water management for the avoidance of climate-related flooding in the Rhine basin: Prof. Toine Smits, University of Nijmegen (the Netherlands).

Ecosystem science: Prof. Andrea Weichman, Federal University of Amazonas (Brazil).

Traffic systems: Prof. Göran Cars, Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) (Sweden).

Innovative business processes: Prof. Alberto Savoldelli, Milan Polytechnic Business School (Italy).

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