



The Natural Step and Fundamental Human Needs

By Terry Gips, President, Alliance for Sustainability

The Natural Step specifies that there are four conditions for planetary sustainability. The first three are ecologically-focused and the fourth mixes social and efficient considerations: “Just and efficient use of resources to meet the basic needs of all people.”

To address the issue of basic needs, the Natural Step is utilizing the basic needs analysis of Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef (“Development and human needs” in *Real-life Economics: Understanding Wealth Creation*, Paul Ekins and Manfred Max-Neef, London and NY: Routledge). His work has been at the core of human scale development in Latin America. Unfortunately, few Americans are aware of it. Max-Neef’s concepts are used extensively by the Natural Step community facilitators in Sweden.

Max-Neef postulates that “basic needs are finite, few and classifiable” and that they “are the same in all cultures and all historical periods.” Rather than there being a hierarchy of needs as presented by Maslow, he believes these needs are always present. “What changes, both over time and through cultures, is the way or means by which the needs are satisfied.” He believes needs are not substitutable—you can have lots of one fulfilled but it doesn’t do anything about the rest. At the same time, through our selection of satisfiers, we can fulfill more than one need at once.

He suggests there are nine basic human needs: subsistence, protection/security, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity/meaning and freedom. He believes there may be a tenth, transcendence, but is not sure that it is universal (I would suggest it is).

Some of the needs and their satisfiers (there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence) are very straightforward, such as protection (curative and health systems) and understanding (formal or informal education). But in other cases we confuse needs and satisfiers. For example, he believes food and shelter are not needs, but rather, satisfiers of the need for subsistence. There are different ways we can meet that need, such as infant formula or breast feeding. Bottle feeding will satisfy the need for subsistence, but breast feeding will simultaneously satisfy the needs for subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, identity and freedom.

Each society adopts different methods for the satisfaction of the same fundamental needs. “We may go so far as to say that one of the aspects that define a culture is its choice of satisfiers. Whether a person belongs to a consumerist or to an ascetic society, his/her fundamental human needs are the same.”

The good news ecologically is that it is possible to actually have more satisfaction with less stuff. It’s not the materials and energy that provide satisfaction, but the degree to which basic needs are met. Instead of voluntary simplicity (the idea of living with less, which I practice but which presently has a limited audience), abundance can be offered. We can say to people that they can have more of what they’ve always wanted (safe, healthy, and attractive communities and environments) and less of what they never wanted (violence, fear, abuse, pollution, injustice, etc.). It doesn’t take more resources, just a design based on meeting fundamental human needs.

Such an approach can be quite attractive in American society because rather than having to give up things, Americans can have an abundance of what they've always wanted.

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