

# Manfred Max-Neef's Fundamental Needs and the Natural Step Framework's Fourth Principle for Sustainability

By Terry Gips, President, Alliance for Sustainability

The Natural Step Framework (NSF) specifies that there are four principles for planetary sustainability (see [www.naturalstep.org](http://www.naturalstep.org)). The first three are ecologically-focused and the fourth focuses on social considerations: "People are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs."

To address the issue of basic needs, the NSF utilizes the fundamental 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, 1997). His work has been at the core of human scale development in Latin America and Africa. Unfortunately, few Americans are aware of it. Max-Neef's concepts are used extensively by the NSF 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 help address 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 fundamental needs are met.

While many people practice voluntary simplicity, asking the public to sacrifice and live with less can be a challenge. Instead, we can speak with a powerful, attractive message of abundance: Would you like more of what you've always wanted (learning, laughter, meaningful work and safe, healthy, and attractive communities and environments) and less of what you never wanted (expense, stress, pollution, injustice and fear)? Who would say no to such a positive message? It doesn't take more resources, just a design meeting fundamental human needs. We can accomplish this as a society.

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His approach allows for a reinterpretation of the concept of poverty. Rather than poverty just being defined as being below a certain income threshold, he argues that "any fundamental human need that is not adequately satisfied reveals a human poverty." He then suggests that "each poverty generates pathologies" that necessitate a constructive dialogue regarding both the effects of their deprivation and their potential for becoming a resource.

Based on such an analysis, he believes the US is among the poorest countries in the world. We're fooled by thinking that all of our economic goods will fulfill our fundamental needs. No wonder that once the elusive American dream is captured, so many people discover their lives are empty and meaningless.

Another place we're confused is with economic goods, which, due to advertising and the media, we see as fundamental needs. He believes that they are more correctly seen as objects that make it possible to increase or decrease the efficiency of a satisfier. He says that in a strict sense goods are "the means by which individuals empower satisfiers to meet their needs."

"When, however, the form of production and consumption of goods makes goods ends in themselves, then the alleged satisfaction of a need impairs its capacity to create potential. This creates the conditions for entrenching an alienating society engaged in a productivity race lacking any sense at all. Life, then, is placed at the service of artifacts, rather than artifacts at the service of life. The question of the quality of life is overshadowed by our obsession to increase productivity." This helps to explain the great sense of disappointment and alienation felt by so many people who have worked hard and succeeded in achieving the American Dream.

Max-Neef's approach has a built-in incentive for adoption: Everyone will benefit. Since the fundamental needs are shared by everyone, it is more likely to get broad support, especially if there are grassroots societal discussions about fundamental needs and how they can be met. Those who hold tight to power and money (which may be seen as an attempt to assure security and other fundamental needs are addressed) will have strong incentives to consider relaxing their grip. It is something that Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Greens and the Fed-Up can agree on and support.

They will recognize that we will never become sustainable unless we design a society that meets the fundamental needs of every person. If we do not, those in need will have no choice but to do whatever needed to survive, whether cutting down rainforest, killing endangered species, overfishing, stealing or committing violent acts.

As we see that every one of us affects our tiny Spaceship Earth and that there are economic and social opportunities for businesses and communities based on the NSF's four principles for sustainability, there will be powerful forces for a sustainable society in which every person's fundamental needs can be met. This is perhaps the most important conversation of our time.

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