

Towards strategies for change and transformation

- Guidelines -

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1. Introduction

The **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** are part of the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**. “The SDGs have the potential to become the guiding vision for governmental, corporate and civil society action for a shared and lasting prosperity” (Hajer et al., 2015, p.1657). In other words, there was a big expectation that SDGs could support the process to facilitate and create enabling conditions for more effective strategies towards sustainable development.

This influence and leverage could result in **favorable policy or legislation changes**, creating powerful and purposeful common agendas, **highlighting ecosystem services and human well-being** benefits of nature and nature-based solutions, increased **resource availability for conservation work**, increased recognition of **civil society movements**, strengthening **sustainability of localized efforts**, with a focus on **transparency and accountability**. The main purpose of these actions is to bring about global, national and local changes amongst different actors and stakeholders whose decisions and actions affect **biodiversity and human well-being**¹.

However, the Global Sustainable Development Report 2019, pointed out that “the biggest transformative potentials of the 2030 Agenda do not lie in pursuing single Goals or targets but rather in a **systemic approach** that manages their **myriad interactions**”. Therefore, some questions remain open. **Are the SDGs achievable? What will it take to achieve them?** And looking beyond 2030, what are the **pathways likely to deliver long-term prosperity for all on a stable planet?** (Dixson-Decleve et al, 2022).

In the last years, other options such as **Inner Development Goals**² and **Flourishing Goals** have emerged to guide the discussion beyond 2030. Also, other sustainability frameworks, such as **Regenerative Development** have been proposed “based on a holistic worldview and paradigm, integrating recent understandings from science and practice, different ways of knowing, and inner and outer dimensions of sustainability necessary for systemic transformation” (Gibbons, 2019).

Even though having common and integrated goals and visions is essential, it is also necessary to consider how to achieve them by creating **strategies for change and transformation**. Different frameworks exist to support this process, such as **social-ecological transformation** (Moore et al, 2014), **four strategies for large systems change** (Waddell, 2018), **ecosystem stewardship** (Chapin et al, 2009), and **nature-based solutions**, among others.

Finally, these strategies can be further developed with tools like the **Theory of change** (ToC). ToCs are mental representations and theoretical assumptions that explain how and why an initiative's activities generate particular changes and transformations (Oberlack et al., 2019). ToCs promote collective reflections for knowledge co-production among the initiative's stakeholders.

¹ Based on “Global Environment & Development Agendas: An Integrated Strategy for Conservation”, Conservation Standards. Final Report 2020

² Website: <https://innerdevelopmentgoals.org/>

2. Objectives of the task

- Identifying and analyzing strategies for change and transformation
- Practicing strategic thinking
- Training in the use of MARISCO tools
- Analyzing assumptions of selected strategies (Theory of change)
- Applying knowledge gained
- Developing skills for the examinations

3. Methodology

The group work will be developed through the module along different formats:

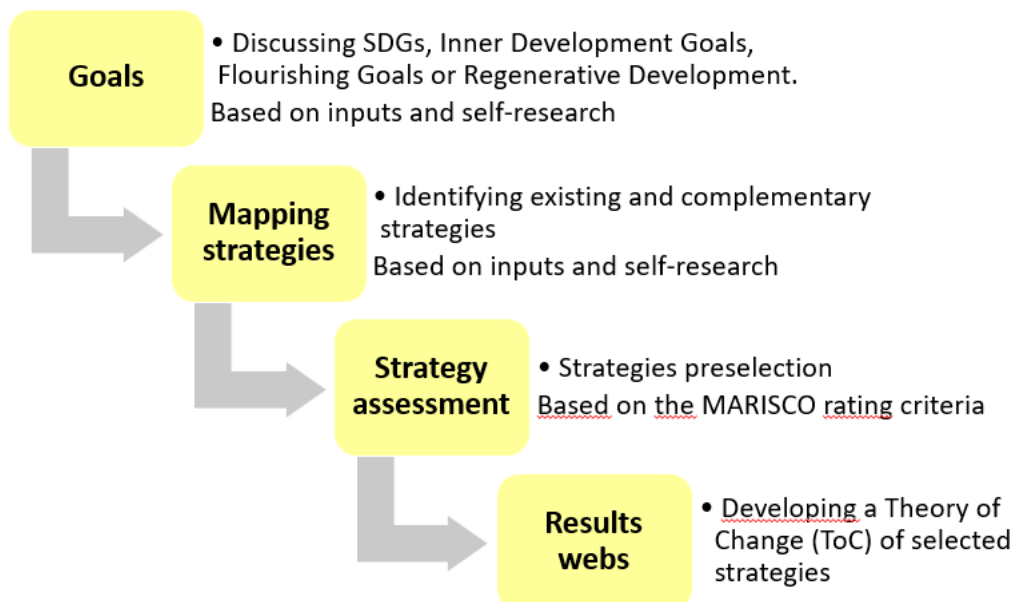
- Group discussions
- Workshops
- Coaching by the lecturers
- Presentations and plenary discussions
- Self-research and readings

From the **MARISCO method**, we will use different steps from the phases:

Phase 5. Strategies (See Schick et al., 2022; pages 57-69)

Phase 6. Plausibility and effectiveness (See Schick et al., 2022; pages 70-72)

The following steps will be taken:



4. Topics

In plenary, a maximum of three topics will be selected by the students. Each group will work on one of those topics following the steps described below.

5. General description of all the steps

A. Goals

The SDGs are global goals part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, other frameworks can be considered for defining or selecting the goals. These are Inner Development Goals, Flourishing Goals, Regenerative Development, among others.

B. Mapping strategies

After every input, all groups should take some time to brainstorm existing strategies that were mentioned or could be inferred from the sessions.

This [table in Google Drive](#) can help to organize all the strategies and capture the main aspects in order to build effective and robust strategies.

In addition to the inputs, groups can have a look at recommended literature and/or self-research sources.

C. Strategies assessment

Each group will assess prioritized strategies using the feasibility and potential impact criteria from MARISCO.

Often strategies are set and implemented without a subsequent assessment of their feasibility and potential impact. This can lead to unreflective management where those executing the strategies have little understanding of their effectiveness. An evaluation of strategies helps to adjust the strategy design and prioritize from the portfolio of strategies. This process improves the effectiveness and robustness of the strategies and helps to avoid negative impacts of the implemented strategies that remain unforeseen without proper reflection.

Schick et al., 2022; p.61

D. Results web

“Results web” is a planning tool of “outcome-impact networks” that can help to better envision the complexities of managing socio-ecological systems, while also taking into account unavoidable uncertainties (Schick et al., 2022; p.70). Other authors called it the “results chain”. This tool is one way to depict a Theory of Change.

Each group will develop a ToC for influencing and leveraging transformation based on pre-selected strategies.

Theories of change (ToCs) are mental representations and theoretical assumptions that explain how and why activities of an initiative generate particular changes. ToCs not only theories but also modes of knowledge production among stakeholders and/or evaluators of an initiative to scrutinize, plan, monitor and reflect on those assumptions. Therefore, ToCs can serve to generate a shared understanding among involved actors regarding pathways to impact of science-based initiatives for sustainable development.

Oberlack et al., 2019

E. Presentations and final discussion

Each group will present:

- The long formulation of the selected strategies
- A summary of the strategies assessment
- A ToC including the results webs, goal(s), objectives and indicators.

After each presentation, a discussion will follow led by the lecturers and with the participation of the students.

6. Suggested Literature

Bentz J, O'Brien K, Scoville-Simonds M. Beyond (2022) "blah blah blah": exploring the "how" of transformation. *Sustain Sci.* 17(2):497-506. doi: 10.1007/s11625-022-01123-0. Epub 2022 Mar 5. PMID: 35282642; PMCID: PMC8897973.

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Bristow, J. Bell, R. Wamsler, C. Björkman, T. Tickell, P. Kim, J. Scharmer, O. (2024). The System Within: addressing the inner dimensions of sustainability and systems change. *The Club of Rome. Earth4All: deep-dive paper 17.* <https://www.clubofrome.org/publication/earth4all-bristow-bell/>

Chapin, F.S., III, S.R. Carpenter, G.P. Kofinas, C. Folke, N. Abel, W.C. Clark, P. Olsson, D.M. Stafford Smith, B.H. Walker, O.R. Young, F. Berkes, R. Biggs, J.M. Grove, R.L. Naylor, E. Pinkerton, W. Steffen and F.J. Swanson. (2009). Ecosystem Stewardship: Sustainability Strategies for a Rapidly Changing Planet. *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 25:241-249.

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Gibbons, L. V. (2019). Regenerative—The New Sustainable? *Sustainability*, 12(13), 5483.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su12135483>

Moore, M.-L., O. Tjornbo, E. Enfors, C. Knapp, J. Hodbod, J. A. Baggio, A. Norström, P. Olsson, and D. Biggs. 2014. Studying the complexity of change: toward an analytical framework for understanding deliberate social-ecological transformations. *Ecology and Society* 19(4): 54.

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Strategies for change and transformation

Global Change Management (CGM). Semester II, SoSe 2025

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Oberlack, Christoph; Breu, Thomas; Giger, Markus; Harari, Nicole; Herweg, Karl Günter; Mathez-Stiefel, Sarah-Lan; Messerli, Peter; Moser, Stephanie; Ott, Cordula; Providoli, Isabelle; Tribaldos, Theresa M.; Zimmermann, Anne; Schneider, Flurina (2019). *Theories of change in sustainability science: Understanding how change happens*. GAIA - Ökologische Perspektiven für Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft / ecological perspectives for science and society, 28(2), pp. 106-111. Oekom Verlag 10.14512/gaia.28.2.8

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Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. (2024). The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press. 10.25546/108572
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Waddell, S. (2018). Four Strategies for Large Systems Change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 16(2), 40–45. <https://doi.org/10.48558/GNE5-BS86>

Methodology

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Foundations of Success. 2020. Planning for Conservation: A How-To Guide. Step 2: Plan.
<https://express.adobe.com/page/s39mBSaSYmkPu/>

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