

# THE ÅLAND FRAMEWORK

## Introduction

This document describes *the Åland Framework*, a framework used to guide a society towards environmental and social sustainability. The aim of *the Åland Framework* is to share experiences from a society working with widescale cultural and material transformation. The content of the document is focused on essential *Elements for Transformation*, and a description of significant *Supporting Functions*.

The Elements for Transformation are important both during initiation and throughout the transition. Furthermore, these elements for transformation illustrates the importance of having a multisectoral approach, as certain key factors are otherwise easily overlooked.

The description of the Supporting Functions provides an overview on essential parts of a platform aiming at enabling the implementation. Necessary approaches, actions, networks, and groups are explained.

By describing *the Åland Framework*, we hope to inspire other societies in their strive towards a life within our planetary and humanitarian boundaries. It is worth bearing in mind that no model or framework can be imported into a new context without adjustment and adaptation. *The Åland Framework* is just that, a framework, and by adapting it to local conditions we hope it can help your community to visualise and realise a sustainable future.

## 1. Elements for Transformation

*The Åland Framework* builds on a belief that a shared vision, developed through a participatory process, is decisive to accelerate wide-scale transformation. The abstract vision should be supplemented by material development goals, leading to action.

The vision and the goals are to be developed by citizens, civil society organisations, businesses, government agencies and political decision makers aware of the challenges facing their society. It is imperative to make an active effort in including a wide range of individuals and stakeholders from day one. Without broad support in the community, the implementation of the vision and goals will not take off.

The starting point, the creation of a community vision as well as material development goals, is vital. It is essential to facilitate a deliberative and democratic process. This can be done in a variety of ways, through citizens juries, consensus conferences, deliberative polls, or town square meetings.

The facilitation and monitoring of the democratic process are the responsibilities of the government, which plays the vital part of upholding structures that can either harm or foster societal change. Therefore, it is important to include at least part of the government from the start, even though the initiative can originate in civil society or elsewhere.

Through the participatory process, citizens and other stakeholders creates a vision for their community. As the name suggest, the vision should be visionary. It is supposed to reflect the best version of society the citizens can imagine and act as an inspiration and a driver of change. However, there are also limits to the vision. As the vision should push the society towards a sustainable future, it needs to be developed within the boundaries of a scientific understanding of sustainability. Such an understanding can be these four principles of sustainability, developed by scientists in the early 1990s<sup>1</sup>:

In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to *systematically* increasing...

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thenaturalstep.org/>

- 1 ...concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust,
- 2 ...concentrations of substances produced by society and
- 3 ...degradation by physical means.
4. And, in that society people are not subject to structures that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs, including (a) health, (b) influence, (c) skills development, (d) impartiality and (e) creation of meaning.

Apart from creating a joint vision, the participatory process should also formulate material development goals in collaboration with expert groups. These goals should be sufficiently specific and measurable. Designated working groups consisting of experts and representatives of different stakeholders should, when the time is right, agree on indicators and progress monitoring.

## People & Civil Society Organisations, Government and Business

A vision and material development goals with broad support in the community will inevitably stimulate a dynamic collaboration between people & civil society organisations, the government and business.

The importance of the civil society organisations (non-governmental organisations) could not be stressed enough. The civil society organisations serve as a place for individuals to channel their engagement for the vision. Through these organisations, people can accelerate their possibilities to act as drivers of change and share experiences. The organisations create a sense of belonging and a way for individuals to be a part of the transition.

A close strategic partnership between civil society organisations should be established. Without this detail, no transformation is likely to take place. The strategic partnership enables the civil society organisations to speak with one voice.

For the individual, adapting to the vision will often require a mind-change. Even though the vision is created by people, it will certainly require a shift in behaviour as the whole point of the vision is to change patterns in society the citizens are dissatisfied with. These patterns are

part of everyone's daily life and become more visible by visioning a different society and new behavioural norms.

Behavioural change is no easy task, and cannot be left to the individual alone, as many of the structures maintained by the government reinforce behaviour. Nonetheless, a vital part of the transformation is dependent on individual mind-change, and structural change is dependent of support from the many individuals.

But not everything can or will change in an instant. Built into *the Åland Framework* is a mutual feedback loop. As more people change behaviour and start demanding public and corporate action – through democratic elections, deliberative conversations, and product demand – the structures and actions by government and business will develop and multiply, making it easier for citizens to make the necessary behavioural changes.

The participatory approach of creating the vision and the strategic development goals gives them legitimacy. Following the creation, the government (parliament and administration) hopefully endorse and incorporate the vision and strategic development goals in its decision-making.

As the goals become incorporated in public decision-making, it enables the governmental agencies to create structures aiding the implementation across different sectors. Structures can be legal (e.g. prohibition of certain unwanted elements), economic incentives (such as taxes or subsidies) or they can be even more direct, such as direct investments in desired infrastructure.

The structures created by new governmental decisions also support the citizens as they incorporate the vision in their daily lives. Furthermore, conscious citizens demand more of both their government, the products and services they buy, and the businesses they work for – driving and accelerating the transformation.

The governmental structures, in tandem with public opinion and demand, stimulates business to develop new action-plans, products, and services. In turn, the actions, products, and services support both government and the citizens as innovation and price-reduction makes sustainable products and services more available.

Businesses and consumers are not altogether different entities as both are made up by citizens and operate within the boundaries of the law. Therefore, the same mind-change that applies to citizens, which resulted in behavioural change, will affect business management.

As described, the three sectors of society are all connected by feedback loops and reinforce each other. However, the kind of sustainable transformation envisioned here is a difficult and slow process. Therefore, the implementation of *the Åland Framework* should be an iterative process. The dynamic collaboration between the three sectors can be stimulated, therefore the creation of supporting functions is the first action to be taken following the endorsement of the vision and the material development goals.

## 2. Supporting Functions

After initiation, certain support functions are needed to make the transformation viable and to institutionalise the vision and the material development goals. The supporting functions are an umbrella concept. The following chapter outlines the characteristics of the essential supporting functions.

It is important to highlight the two-way flow between each sector (civil society, public, and private) and the supporting functions. The supporting functions are not a top-down system designed to provide rules for society, instead it constitutes every part of society and would not function without active citizens, organisations, and businesses.

### Participatory Approach

The backbone of *the Åland Framework* is its participatory approach. It is imperative that all sectors of society participate during the whole transition process. This assures commitment to the changes wanted and confidence in the decision-making process. The first step is therefore deliberation among citizens.

Deliberation is a powerful tool in the decision-making process, as it conceptualises the opinion of the citizens as it would be had they full access to researched material and the

different opinions prevalent in society. Participatory processes streamline opinions and build trust both within society and between the state and the citizenry. After all, the societal changes wanted must be based on the opinions and desires of the people making up the society. As the process develops, government has a special responsibility to enable the multisectoral approach and involve citizens in important policy decisions.

In *the Åland Framework*, deliberation acts as an addition to the representative democracy. During the creation of the vision and material development goals, deliberation takes place among a representative selection of citizens through a process akin to a deliberative poll. As the transformation develops, deliberation is used to capture the opinions of specific groups through focus group discussions. One important point of such discussions is to involve groups whose interests are weakly represented in the political sphere.

As described, the democratic and participatory process is the starting point for the whole transformation and thus vital. However, it is important to realise that not only is the participatory approach essential in the beginning of the transformation, but it is also necessary when moving forward.

The participatory approach serves as the connection between the citizens, the vision, and the transformation. Change will not happen instantly, therefore citizens must have the opportunity to change the vision and the material development goals as the process advances. By listening to opinions and thoughts, common trust and participation grows. Participation can also be an end in itself, that fosters good conversation and concern for a shared community.

## Network Platform

A network platform to act as a hub for the supporting functions is crucial. It should be created as a collaboration between civil society organisations, business and government. It is recommended that arts & culture and education & academia are involved. The network platform is not a government agency, neither a legal entity.

It is a neutral and freely formed collaboration between all its participants. The mode of cooperation in and around the network platform is transparent and in constant development. It is the participants, both individuals and organisations, that continuously provide and transform the content of the network platform.

Within the network, individuals, civil society representative, artists, educators, researchers, business leaders, civil servants and politicians can collaborate and join in conversation with one another. The network organises meetings where representatives of all organisations can take part. This process creates a sense of community and fosters cooperation.

The network is the platform for several collaboration groups, as well as a guidance and coordination function.

A high-level council is tasked with the assessment of the ongoing work taking place throughout society, approving status reports, adjustments to the material development goals, subgoals and indicators. It is vital that not only government (parliament and administration) is represented in the council, but also civil society, municipalities, business, education, agriculture and arts & culture to name a few.

Together, the members of the council share the responsibility for ensuring the vitality and longevity of the transformation and the joint effort of realising the strategic development goals and the vision.

The council members are appointed biannually. The members of the council should be widely respected citizens and be elected to represent the different stakeholders mentioned above. Representatives of the parliament (e.g. speaker) and administration (e.g. head of government/prime minister and administration secretary general) should act as permanent members of the council. For the meetings of the council, experts can be summoned to provide insight and an evidence-based discussion.

A working group is appointed by the council. Its main tasks are coordinating the efforts by different actors who are implementing the material development goals, following up on the various actions, and reporting on indicators. In practice, this means creation and implementation of roadmaps for each goal, including its subgoals, and prevention of duplication of actions by independent actors.

Status reports describing the progress made on each goal and measuring specific indicators are approved by the council. The status report is a public document, made available to the citizens, and wide distribution is encouraged. A citizen's assembly should be held to present the report and enable the citizens to assess the progress and reevaluate the priorities if necessary.

Within the framework of the network there is a possibility to create specific network groups for different stakeholders. Such stakeholders could be businesses or civil society organisations. By providing a platform for collaboration within a sector, each group can focus on models of change and sustainability relevant for them. It is also easier to set goals and share best practices among peers.

The network also serves a source of inspiration and consultation. A guidance function provides guidance, educational activities, and communication efforts to further accelerate the transition. Organisations and businesses can be assisted in their endeavours to streamline their activities with the vision and material development goals. The guidance function will also offer organisations to share good practices and examples, further accelerating the speed of transition.

In guiding organisations towards sustainable practices, the guidance function recommends the use of a back-casting method. Through back-casting, the organisation receiving guidance starts by identifying the desired outcome in relation to the vision and the material development goals. The second step is mapping the current situation and outset, after which solutions and activities are brainstormed. Finally, actions are prioritised among all suggestions. The role of the guidance function in this process is to act as advisor, the solutions must come from within the organisation for a real change in actions to occur.

The transformation in the society is not isolated from the outside world. The guidance function is responsible for continuously analyzing changes in the external situation.

## The Parliament and the Administration

The parliament and the administration are vital for the transformation. An endorsement of a vision and material development goals by the parliament means that the parliament bears the overall political responsibility for the realization of the transformation. The leaders of the political parties in the parliament should monitor the implementation by meeting regularly in a group leader forum, which should cooperate closely with the council.

The Head of government (Prime Minister) and the administration are important for the development towards a sustainable society, being responsible for the strategic long-term planning. In relation to the supporting functions, the administration serves as an enabler. The



material development goals, including its sub-goals and roadmaps, forms the basis for the government's strategic direction, government budgeting and for the activities conducted within the administration.

Through the council, the Parliament and Administration are in close contact with both civil society, municipalities, business, education, agriculture and arts & culture.

## Final words

By working towards the achievement of the material development goals, all these processes contribute to the realisation of the community vision and the desired changes in society. As the vision places emphasis on participatory processes and democracy, the actions taken will support and build a stronger foundation for future democratic procedures. Through this foundation and democratic framework, the empowered citizens can contribute on an even wider scale. At deliberative meetings the citizens can themselves act as decision-makers, and through representative democratic processes they will also further enhance the parliamentary decision-making process and streamline it with the vision.

With this document our intentions are to share our experiences from a society working in depth with sustainable transformation. Åland is a society moving forward, embracing the challenges the future holds for our common planet. These challenges are something all societies face and can embrace.