# *An Introduction to the VISIS Method*

A Method

for Working with Sustainable Development

in an Integrated Way

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# The SDGs support an integrated approach

The Open Working Group emphasized that …

… “these goals constitute an integrated, indivisible set of global priorities for sustainable development.... The goals and targets integrate economic, social and environmental aspects and recognize their inter-linkages in achieving sustainable development in all its dimensions.“

As is said…. “easier said than done.”

Source:

# We have many challenges to effective integrative development planning, that aligns with and supports the SDGs . . .

As we pointed out yesterday, we need…

… good leadership
… multi-stakeholder participation & collaboration
… clear shared vision
… information and data
… transparency and accountability
… ownership of the process and outcomes
… trust and relationships
… and appropriate and effective tools and methods

# Introduction to the VISIS Method

Vision > Indicators > Systems > Innovation > Strategy

# What is VISIS?

An **open-source methodology for inter-disciplinary collaboration** in the context of sustainable development

A **sequence of steps** used in analysis and capacity development processes:

**Vision > Indicators > Systems > Innovation > Strategy**

** "VISIS" was originally called "ISIS". A "Vision" step was usually included as part of the process. The name was changed to VISIS in 2014 to recognize this more explicitly, and to avoid confusion with ISIS or ISIL, the militant group operating in Iraq and Syria.*

# Intent of the VISIS Method

- **Guide and orient you** throughout the sustainability action cycle
- **Help you integrate** other tools and processes in a coherent sequence
- **Accelerate** the process by providing a sharable road map
- **Focus** efforts at the points of greatest impact and leverage

# Theoretical Basis:
# The Sustainable Development Planning & Action Cycle*

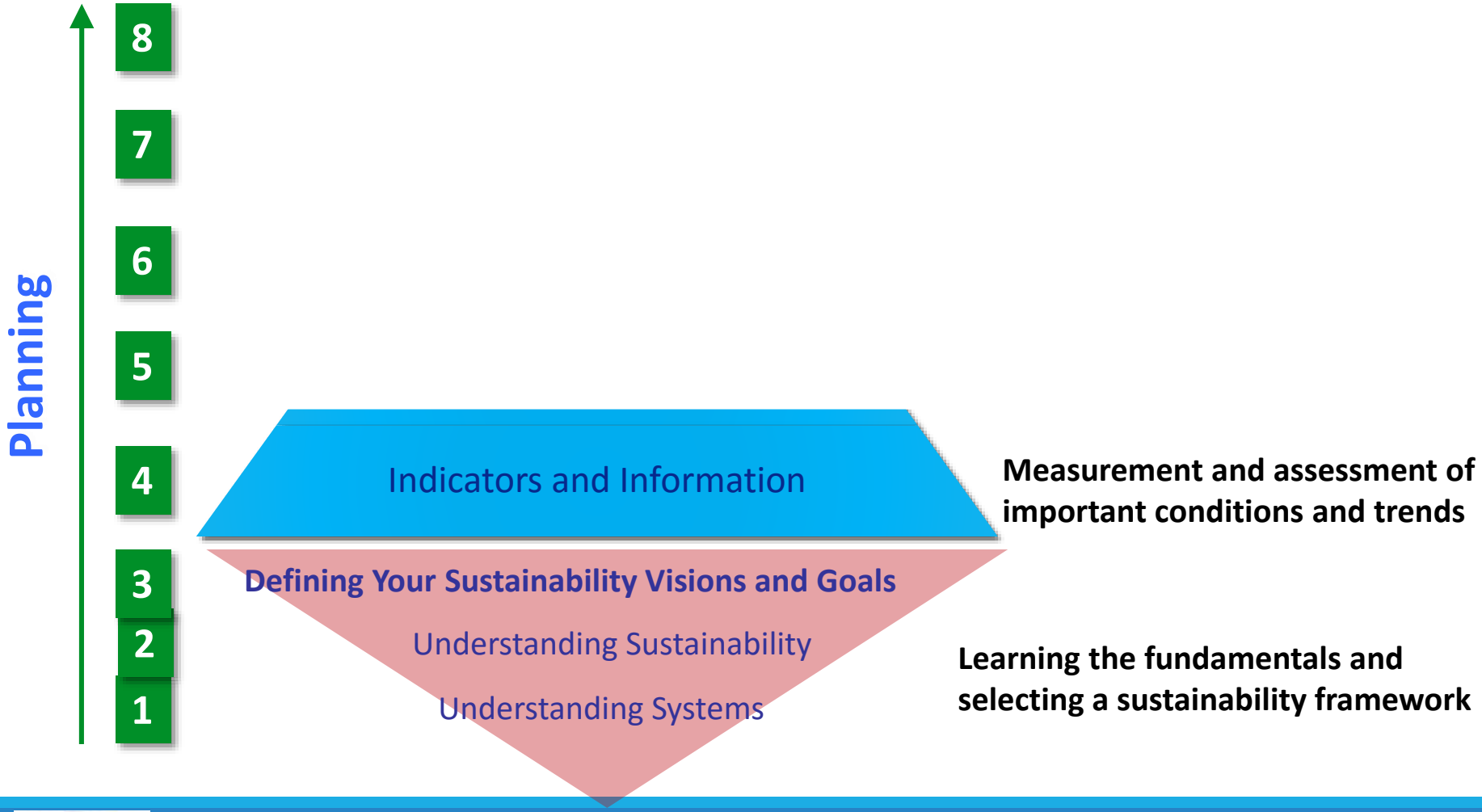

**Defining Your Sustainability Visions and Goals**

Understanding Sustainability

Understanding Systems

**Learning the fundamentals and selecting a sustainability framework**

# Theoretical Basis:
# The Sustainable Development Planning & Action Cycle*



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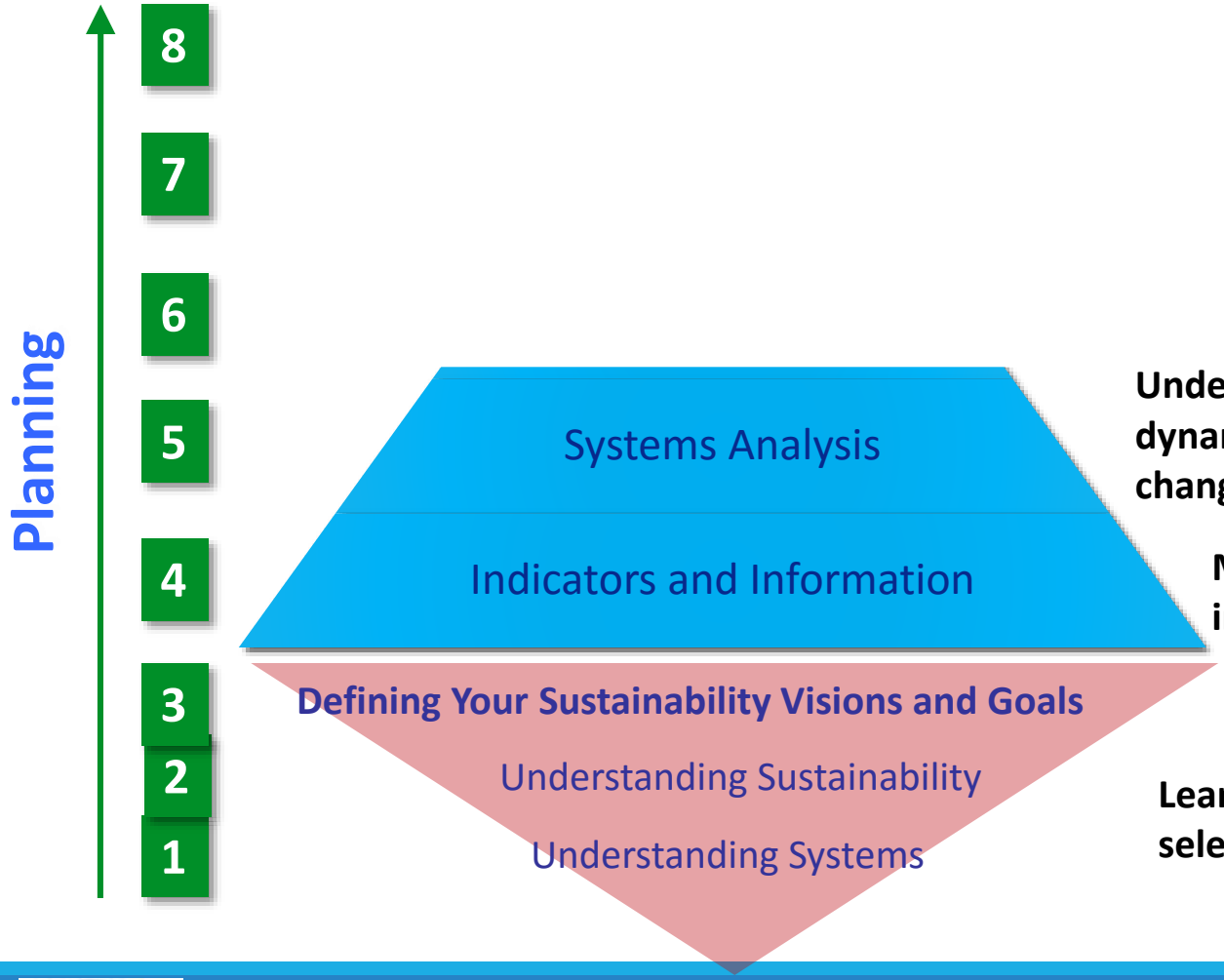

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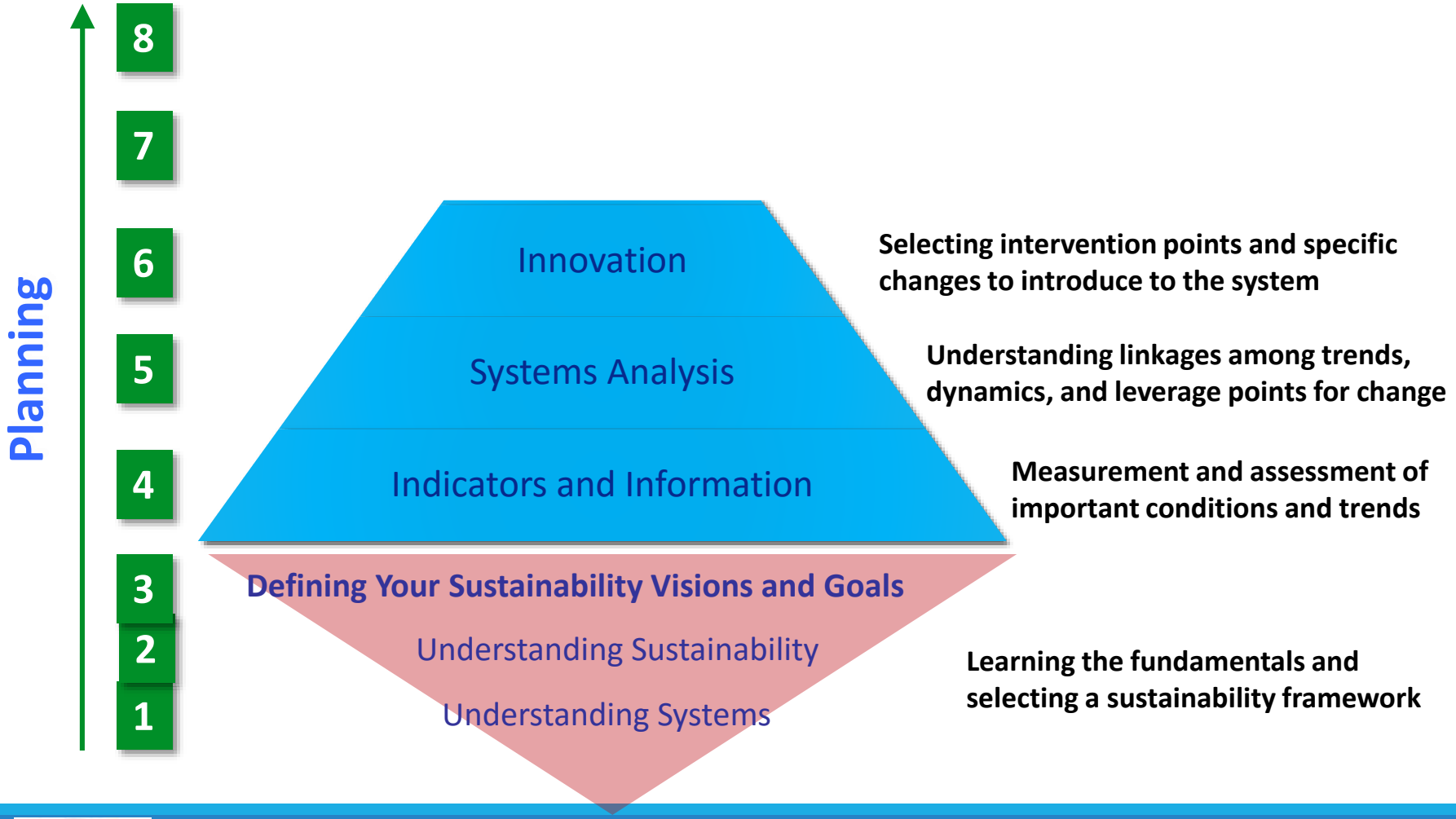

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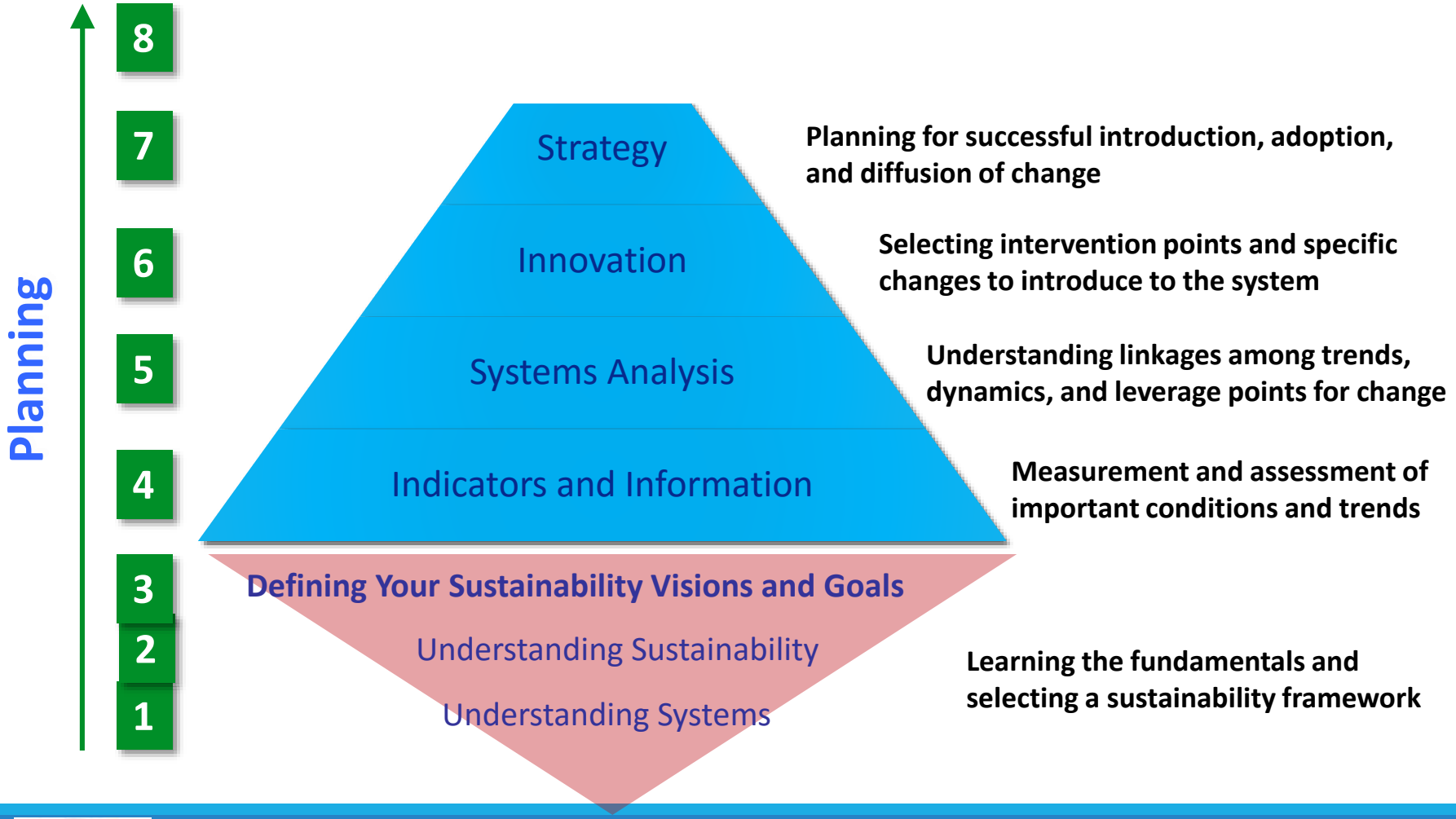

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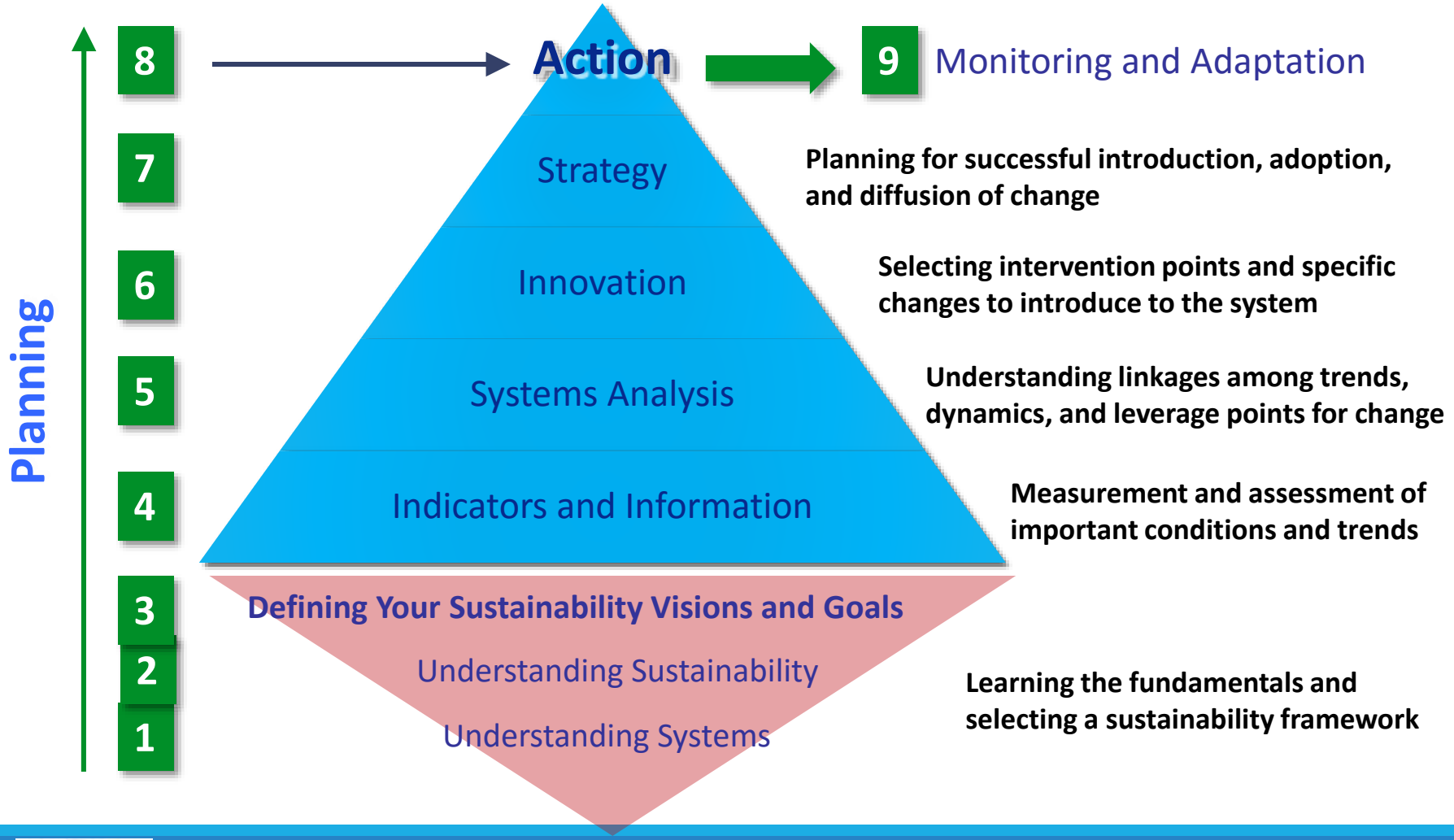
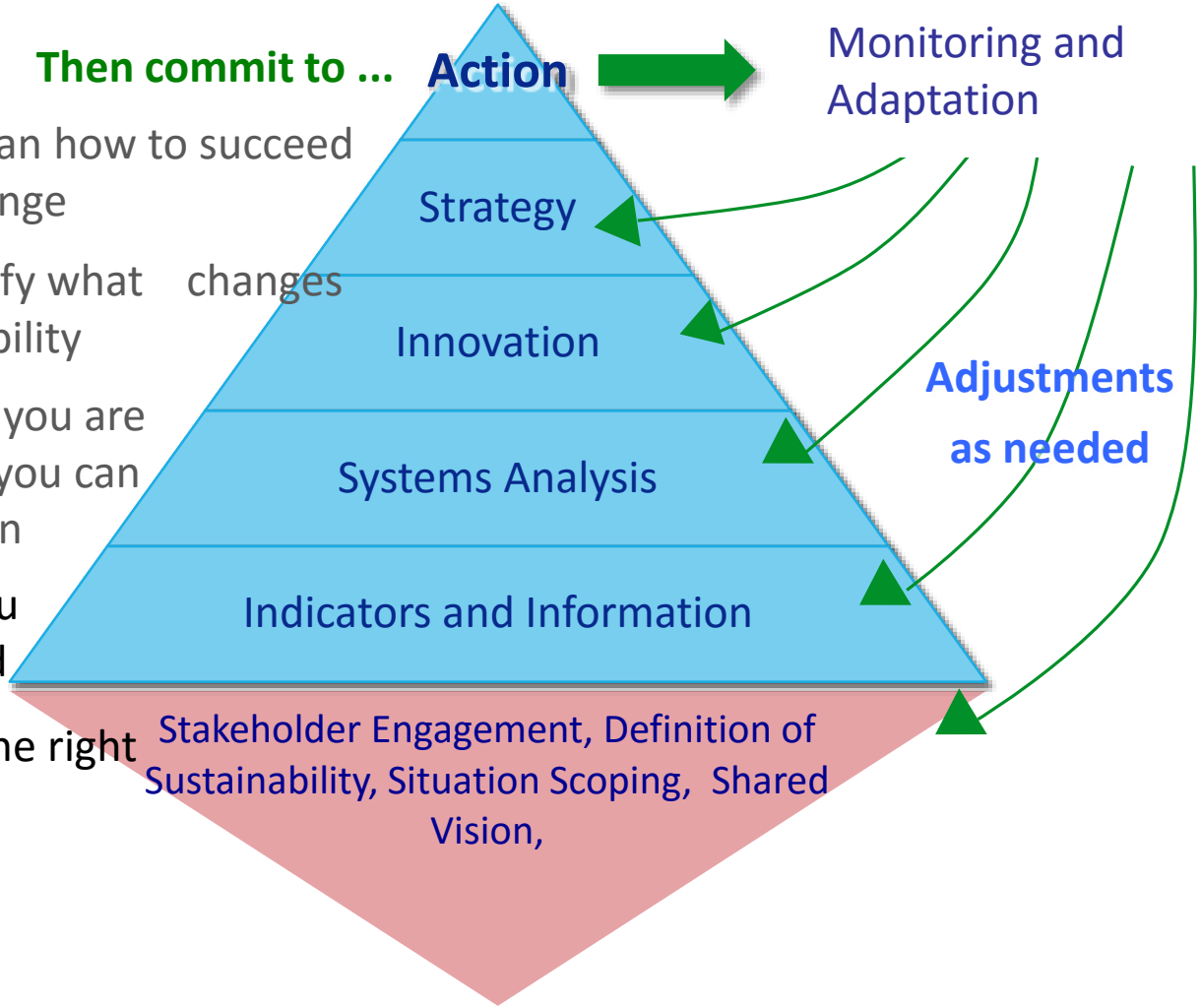


# AtKisson's VISIS Method simplifies this to make it easier to use and communicate in practical ways




**STRATEGY:** Plan how to succeed in making change

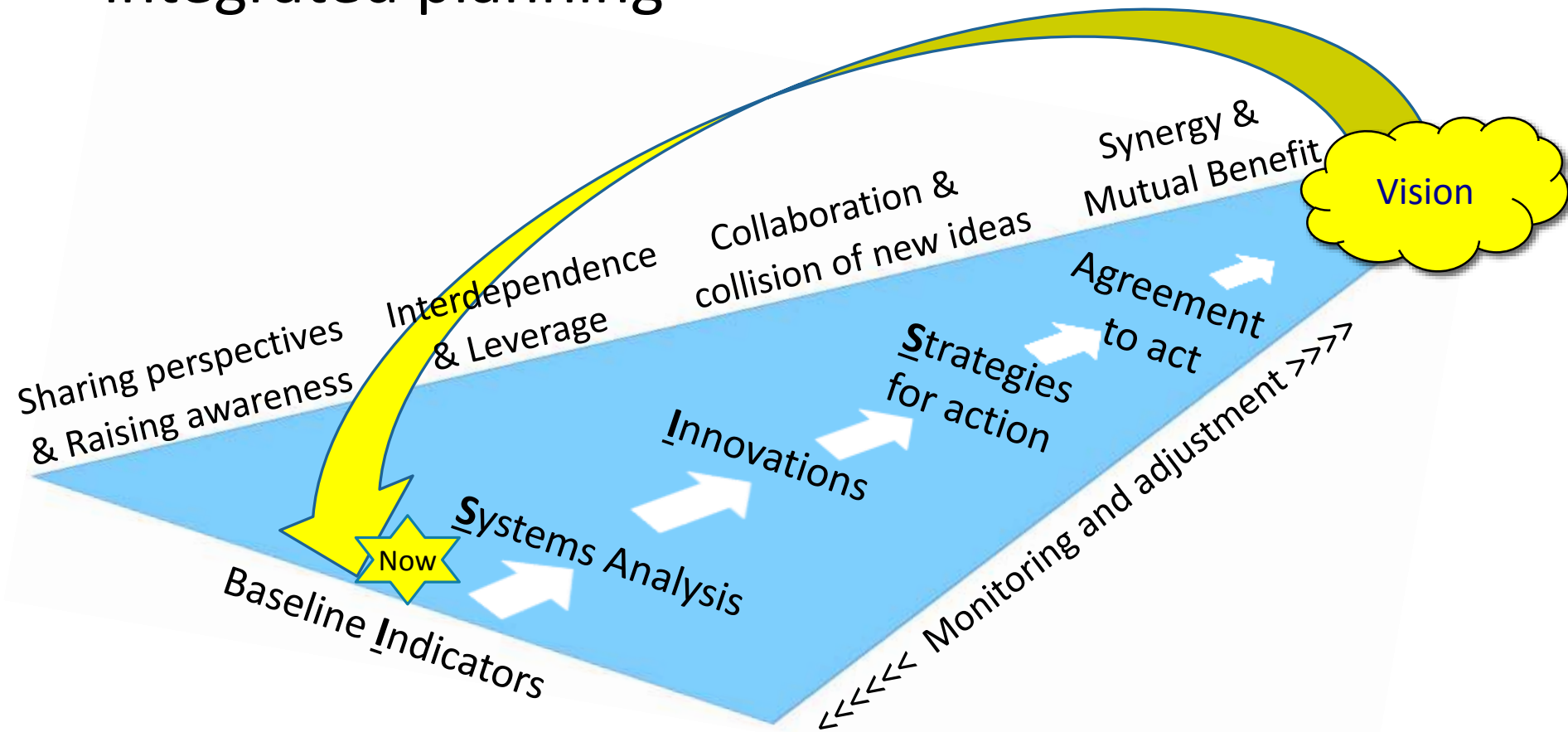
**INNOVATION:** Identify what changes to make for sustainability

**SYSTEMS**: Figure out why you are headed there, and where you can effectively change direction

**INDICATORS**: Assess where you are, and where you are headed

**Visioning**: Starting with the right people and identifying a preferred future.

# VISIS uses a ‘backcasting’ approach to integrated planning



# The Foundational Tool . . The Compass

An Orientation, assessment, planning and collaborative action tool for sustainability and transformation

# An open and adaptable framework … with guidance on general principles

The Sustainability Compass is designed to accommodate many kinds of differences: cultural, sectorial, geographic, etc.

It is also designed to interface well with other common frameworks (e.g. GRI, ISO 26000, SDGs)

# The Sustainability Compass also lines up well with the 17 SDGs

**Built into the Compass approach is a set of core guiding principles about sustainability**

# The Compass Principles

**The "Nature" Principle:**
The physical and biological limits of Earth's ecological systems must be respected.

**Nature**

**The "Wellbeing Principle":**
Human beings have a right to be to be safe, to have access to healthcare, and to have the opportunity for self-expression, self-development, and a good quality of life.

**Wellbeing**


**The "Economy" Principle:**
Human societies, communities, and organizations need functioning economies to provide for their needs and to support their aspirations.

**Economy**

**Society**

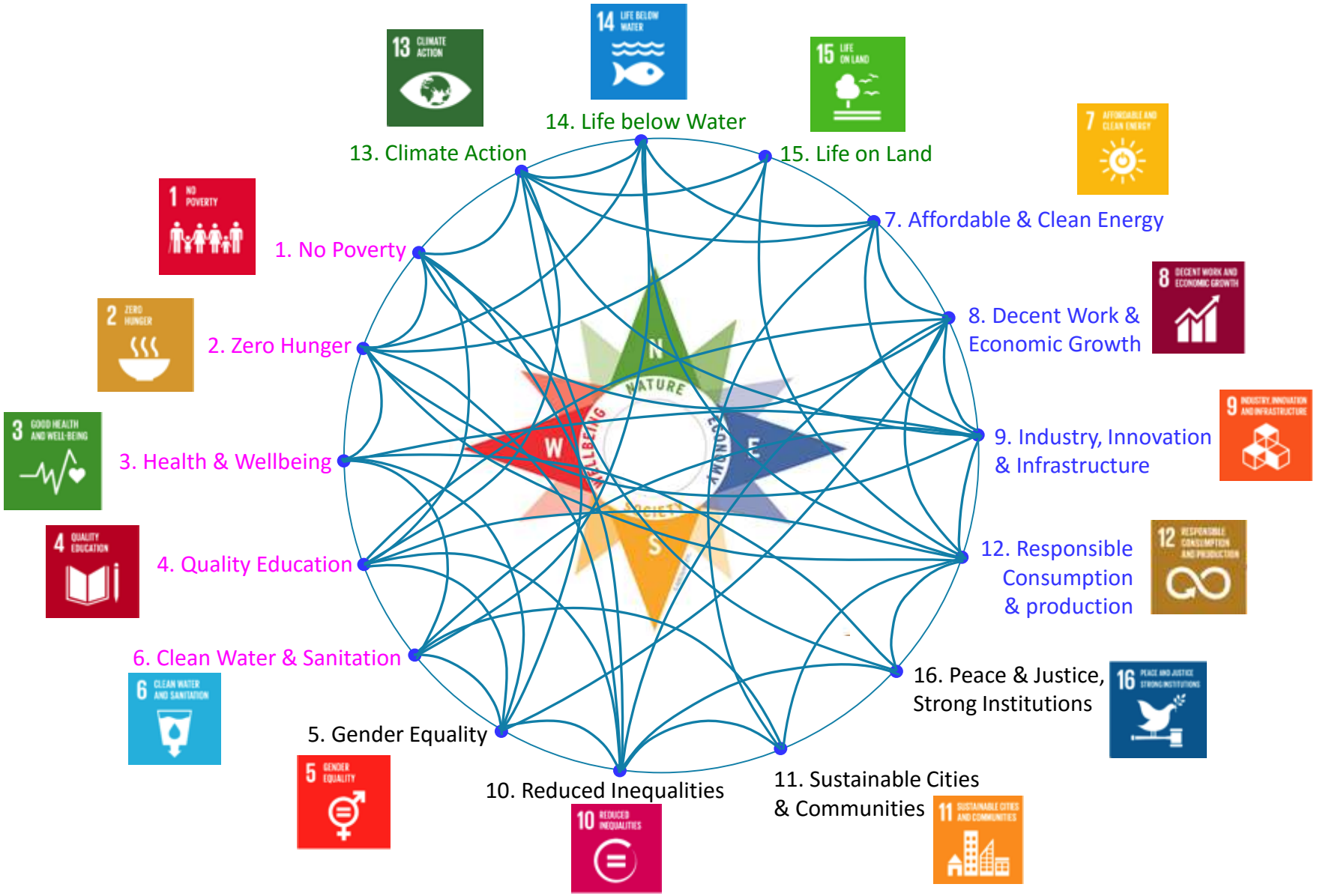
**The "Society Principle":**
Social systems should be organized in ways that promote equity, fairness, resilience, and opportunity for all.

# The “Integration Principle”:

## All four dimensions of the Sustainability Compass are interconnected in a web of cause-and-effect relationships. They are interdependent on each other.

- The Compass approach is grounded in the science of system dynamics and in general understanding of how complex systems behave.
- In recognition of this principle, governance and management systems should strive to achieve optimal results across all four Compass Points in an integrated way.

# THE COMPASS IS A SYSTEMIC INTEGRATION TOOL



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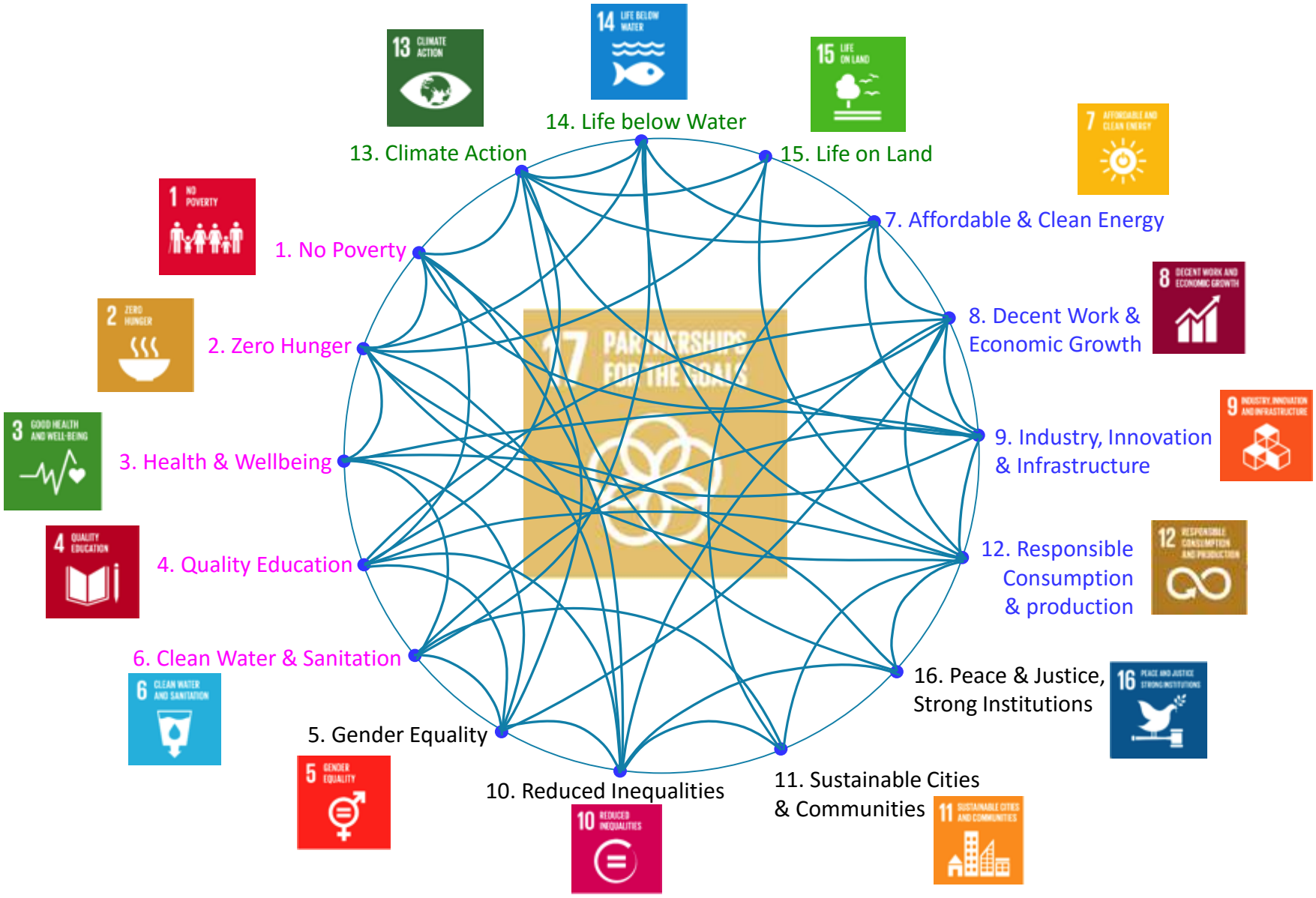


# The Compass Points in Practice

- *N = Nature =*

  Environmental impact, resource use, waste, ecosystems and habitat, water, energy, climate change

- *E = Economy =*

  Production, consumption, employment and work, money, investment, debt, business, innovation

- *S = Society =*

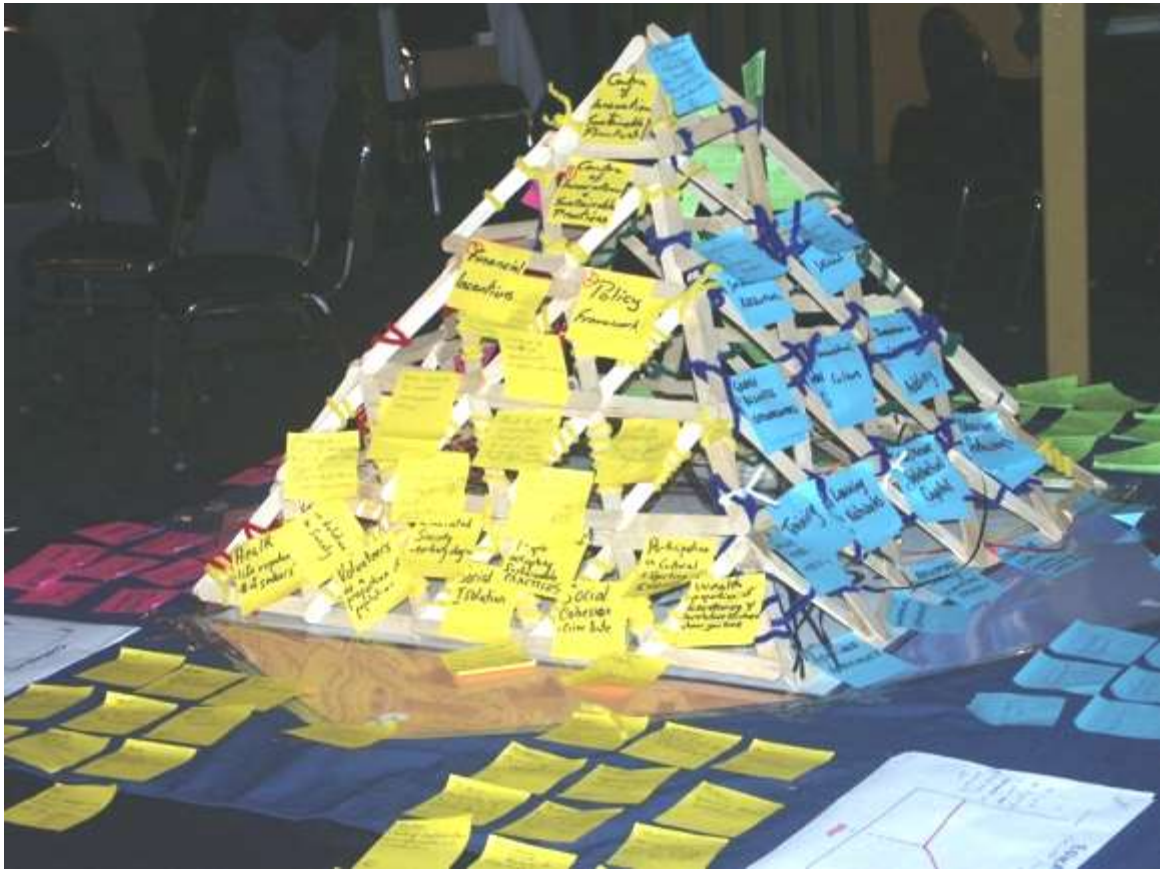
  Governance, equity, transparency, security, culture, institutional management, levels of trust

- *W = Wellbeing =*

  Health, education, self-expression, happiness, relationships, family, creativity, quality of life


*It helps us think about issues from many different perspectives*

# Compass + VISIS = PYRAMID

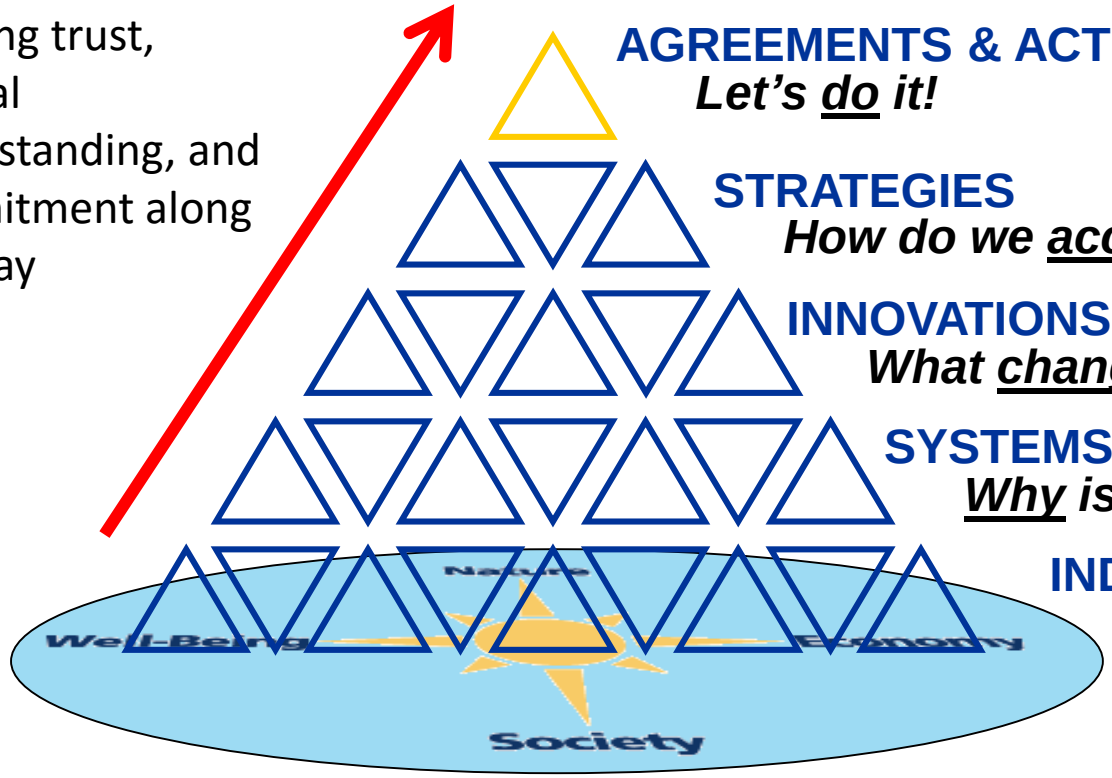


# Pyramid


- ✓ Built around the VISIS sequence
- ✓ Used for collaborative group learning and planning processes
- ✓ Guides people quickly (takes 1-2 days or 1 years) through the entire learning/ planning/ action cycle
- ✓ Produces a 3-D record of the results ... and strong consensus on action

# The Pyramid works with the Compass and the VISIS Accelerator method

Building trust, mutual understanding, and commitment along the way



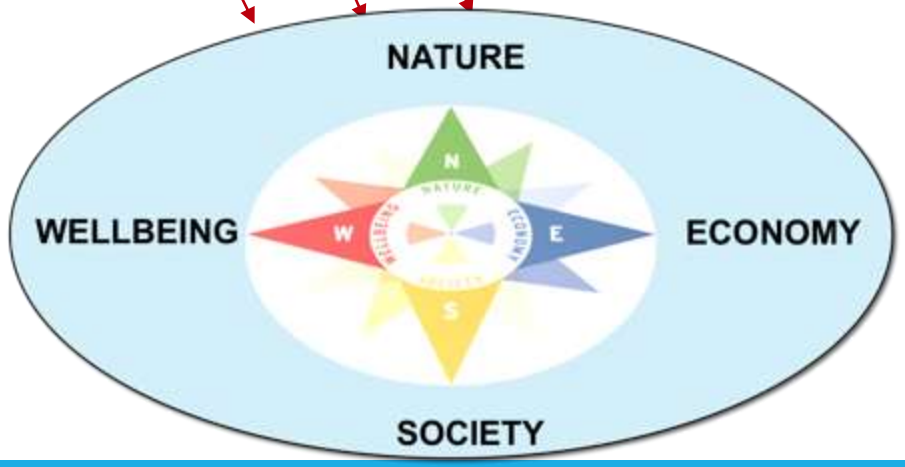

# Visioning Level

## Clarifying your Purpose, Principles, and Guiding Definitions

**WHO DO WE INVOLVE IN THIS PROCESS? WHICH STAKEHOLDERS?**

**WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES AND AREAS OF CONCERN FOR THE PRESENT AND FUTURE**

**WHAT ARE PEOPLE'S ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE?**



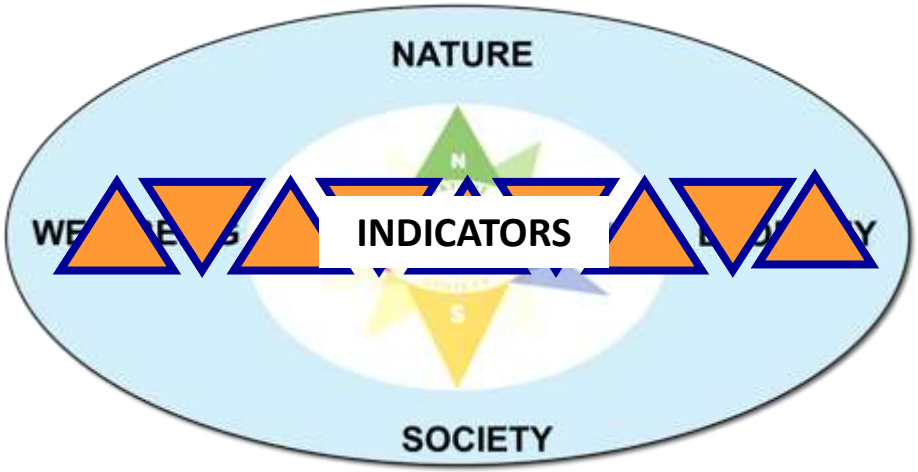

- Working Definition Of Sustainability
- Key Principles
- Vision, Goals,
- Boundaries
- Measurable Future Outcomes


# Indicators Level

## Baseline Information about critical & long-term trends

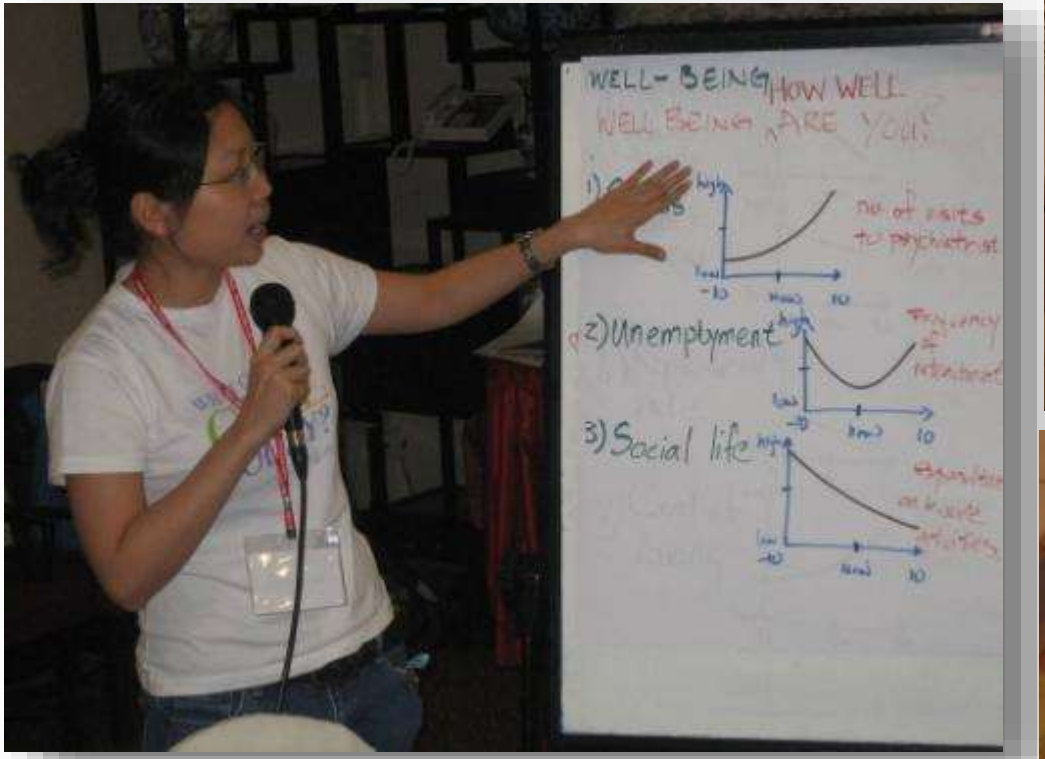
**Objective: To** construct a responsive ***Sustainability System Status Indicator*** framework.

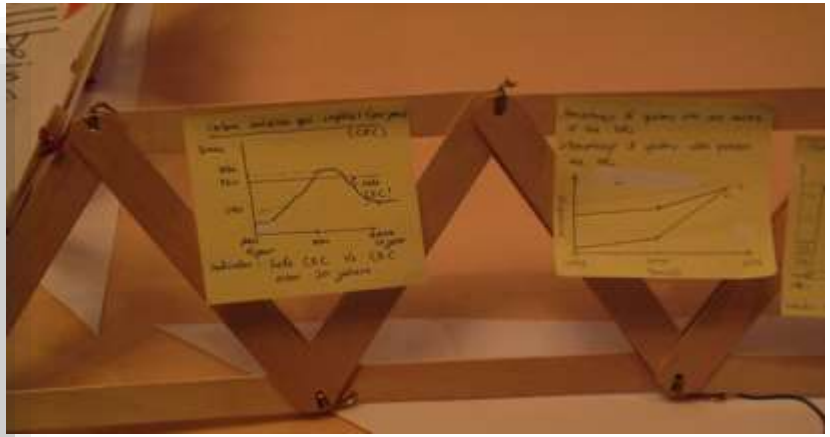
At the Indicator Level, groups / teams are collect and select data, both formal and informal, on trends and issues working for and against progress toward the vision and/or goal and desired future Outcomes.

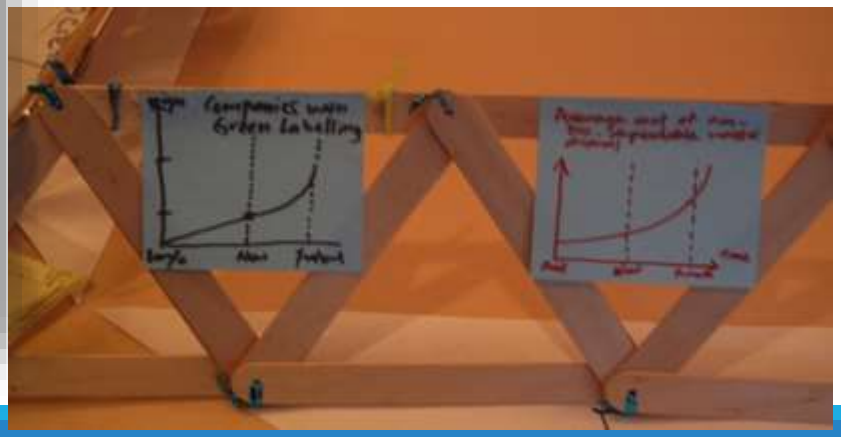



- ✓ Using multi-disciplinary teams or consultation processes, covering all aspects of sustainable development
- ✓ Using a framework to cluster the indicators
- ✓ Using formal data/indicators when available
- ✓ Use informal/subjective knowledge of prevailing trends, when formal data is not available

# Indicator Level

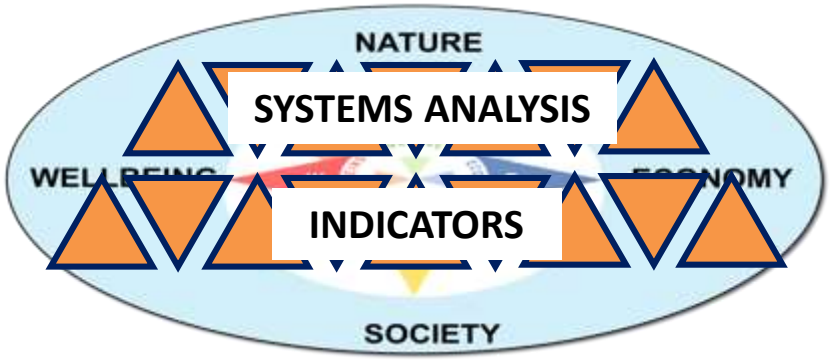




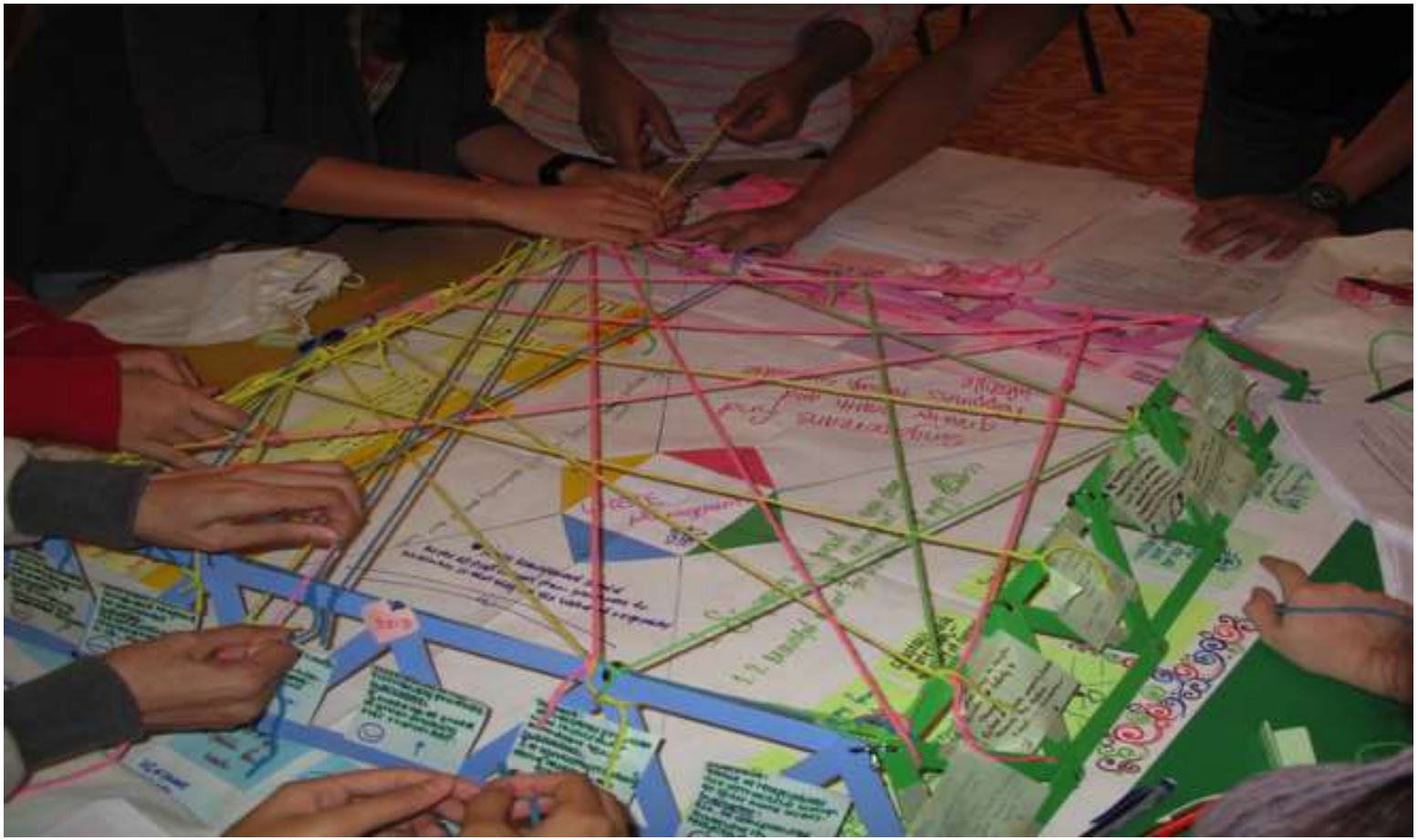

# Systems Level

Multi-disciplinary teams review the indicators and look for cause-and-effect links, including chains of cause-and-effect.

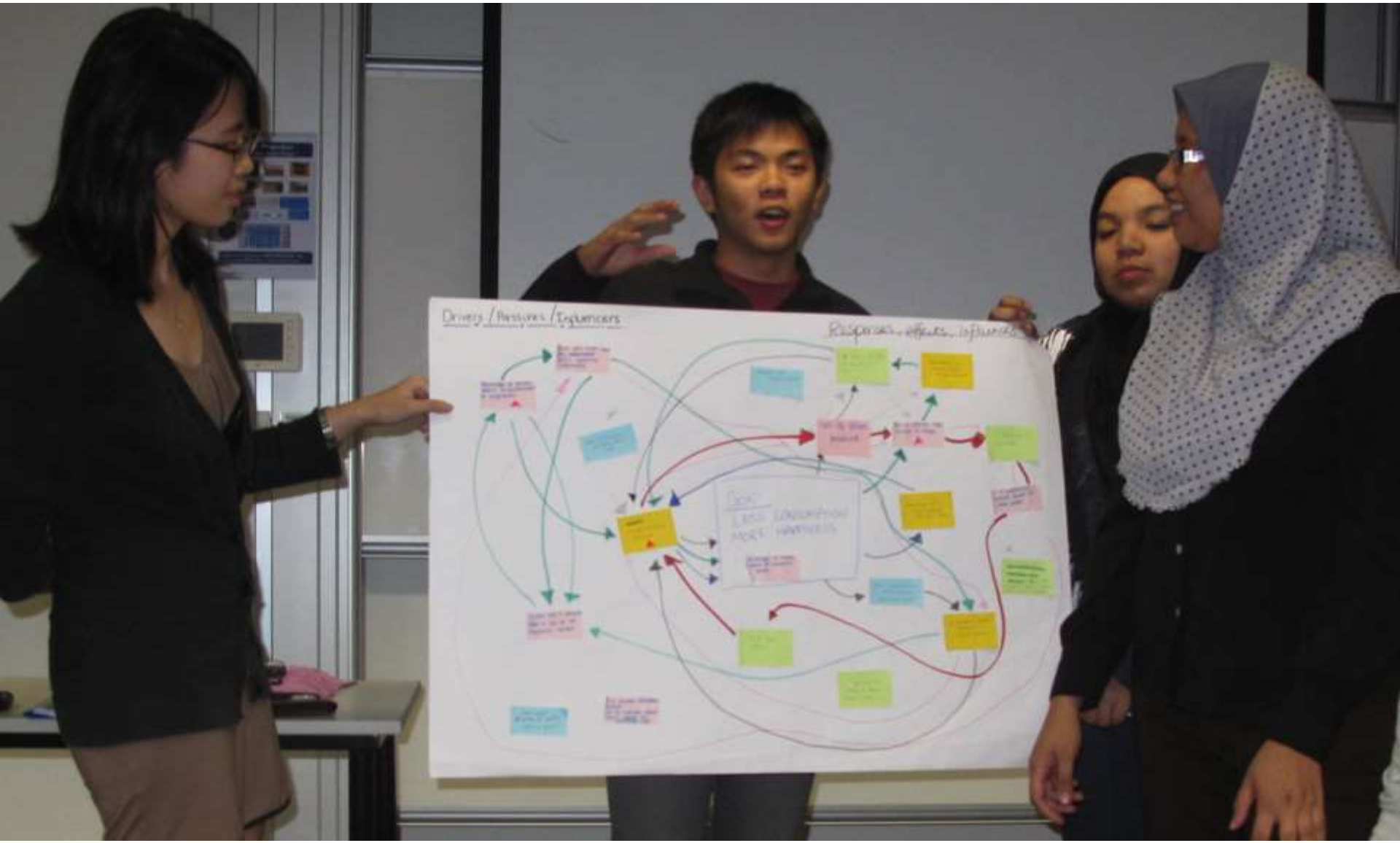



- ✓ Discussion to identify important causes and drivers of change, and to share other systemic insights
- ✓ Group sketching to illustrate important links and webs of connection between issues
- ✓ Formal systems modeling

# Identify Pyramid Compass System Linkages

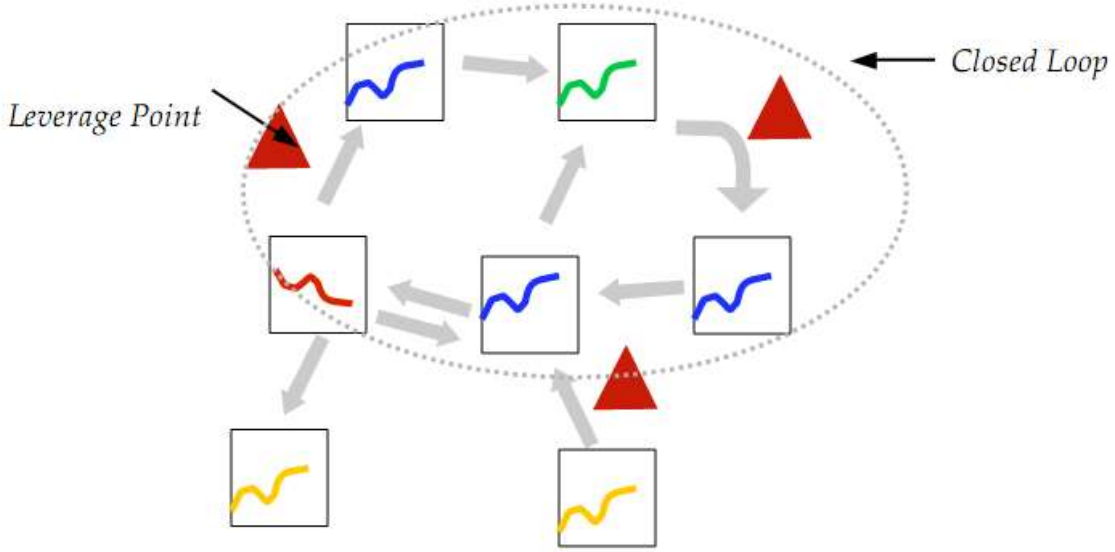


# Mapping the System and Identifying feedback loops and leverage points for change

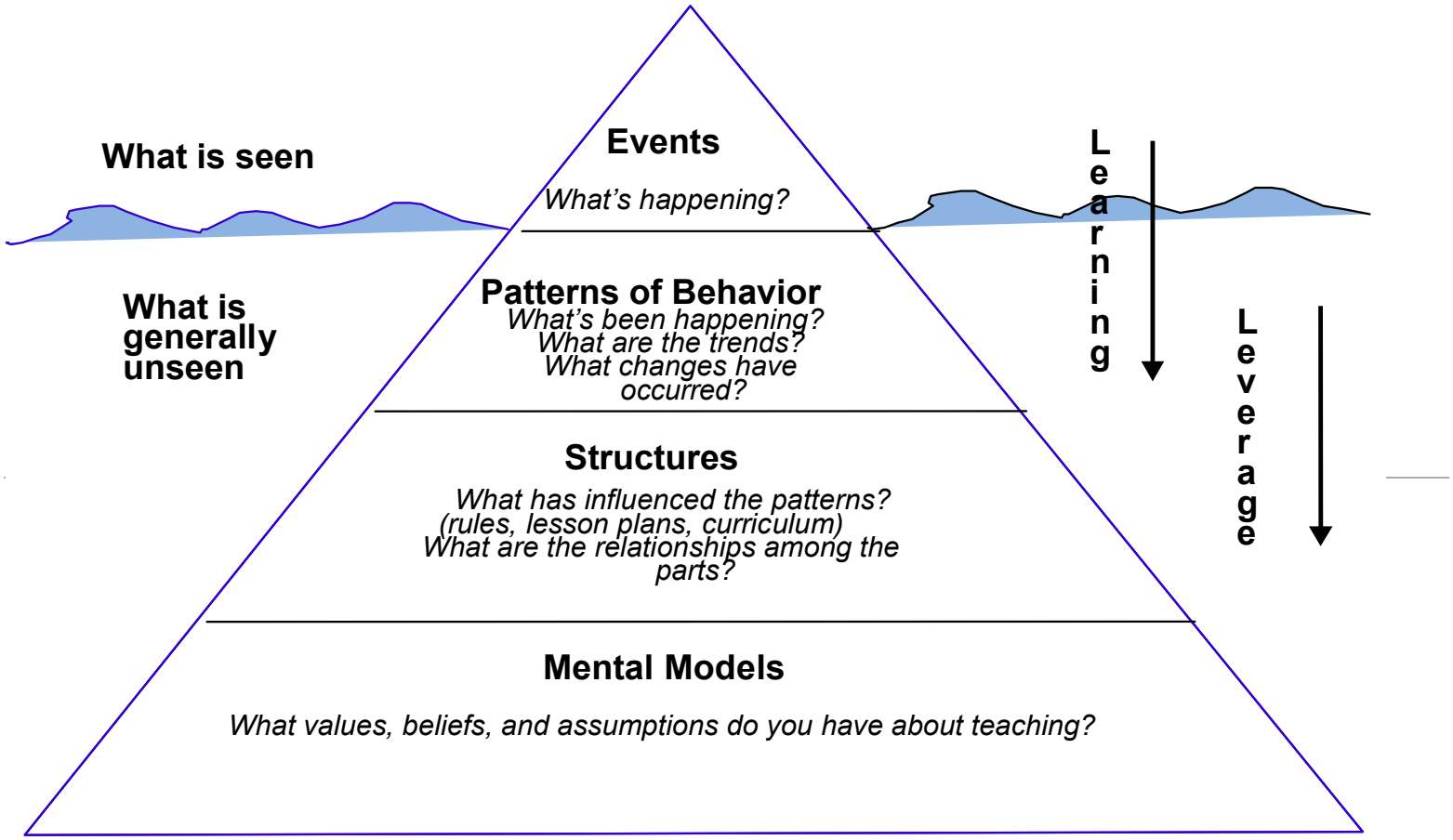


# Key is finding the right Leverage

Identifying in your system where you can intervene with a new projects, program, technology, policy, etc. that will change the system behaviour towards the direction that you want.



# At the Systems Level we can apply other systems thinking tools such as the Iceberg to help understand leverage



# Leverage Points


## Changes in Conciousness and Thinking (Mental Model Level)

1. The power to transcend paradigms. Example: Mastering the art of engaging multiple perspectives and mapping systems; profoundly and madly letting go of our beliefs and notions of how the world should work.

2. The mindset or paradigm out of which the system — its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters — arises. Example: Modeling a system and seeing it in a new way; shifting a country's aspiration from gross domestic product (GDP) to gross national happiness (GNH).

## Changes in Variable Interrelations (System Structure Level)

1. The goals of the system. Example: Setting a goal of landing on the moon before any other country; aligning around shared goals for a system over individual or siloed outcomes.

2. The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure. Example: Embracing a collective impact model for a local community effort; the use of flat, non-hierarchical org structures.

3. The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments, constraints). Example: Imposing strict rules on water usage and charging for overages; changing campaign finance laws on who can donate and how much.

*Adapted from "Leverage Points: Ways to Intervene in a System," by Donella H. Meadows. Available from www.sustainer.org*

# Leverage Points


6. The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to information). Example: Creating a "nudge" to reduce energy usage by connecting households to information about their usage; opening access to government data to increase accountability.

**Changes in Energy Flow (Pattern of Behavior Level)**

6. The gain around driving reinforcing feedback loops. Example: Reducing the birth rate; lowering the influence of the wealthy on the political system (reducing the gain of reinforcing feedback loops gives the balancing loops time to work their magic).

8. The strength of balancing feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against. Example: Increasing the amount of time set aside for leisure, exercise and family; building an informed and engaged civic population.

9. The lengths of delays, relative to the rate of system change. Example: Time to build new housing relative to changes in demand; reducing information delays in the stock market (warning: delays are not often easily changeable, hence their low ranking)

*Adapted from "Leverage Points: Ways to Intervene in a System," by Donella H. Meadows. Available from www.sustainer.org*

# Leverage Points


## Changes in Form (Events level)

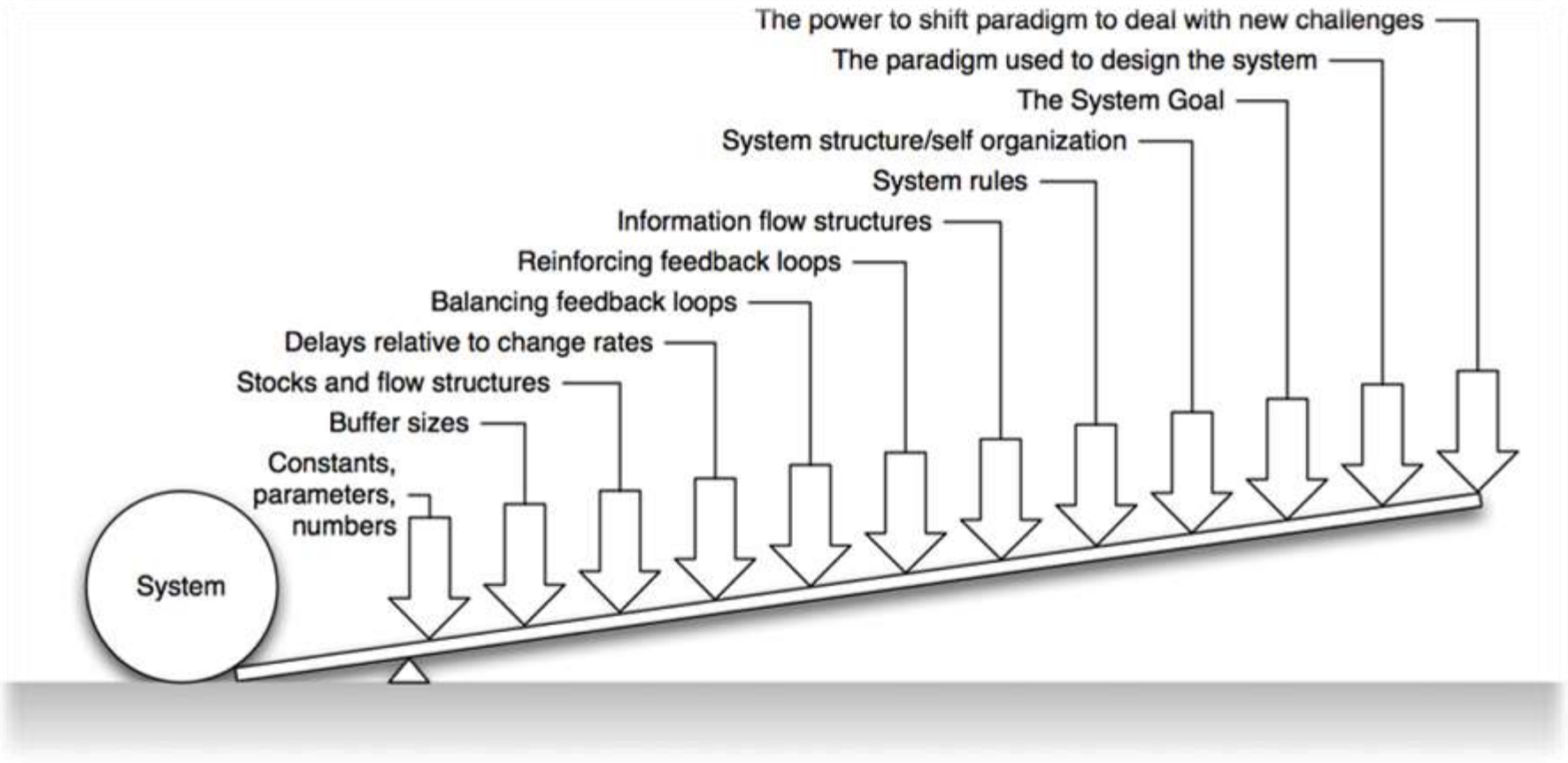
10. The structure of material stocks and flows (such as transport networks, population age structures). Example: Building new roads or removing old ones; adding high speed rail between Los Angeles and the Bay Area (changes can be very high leverage, but are incredibly difficult to enact - the leverage is in proper initial design).

11. The sizes of buffers and other stabilizing stocks, relative to their flows. Example: Altering the amount of inventory a business holds on hand; increasing the size of water reservoirs or the size of the snowpack (you can see some buffers are *very* hard to change).

12. Constants, parameters, numbers (such as subsidies, taxes, standards) Example: Raising (or lowering) the minimum wage; hiring or firing individual people when it's a systemic issue.

*Adapted from "Leverage Points: Ways to Intervene in a System," by Donella H. Meadows. Available from www.sustainer.org*


# Where the greatest leverage lies

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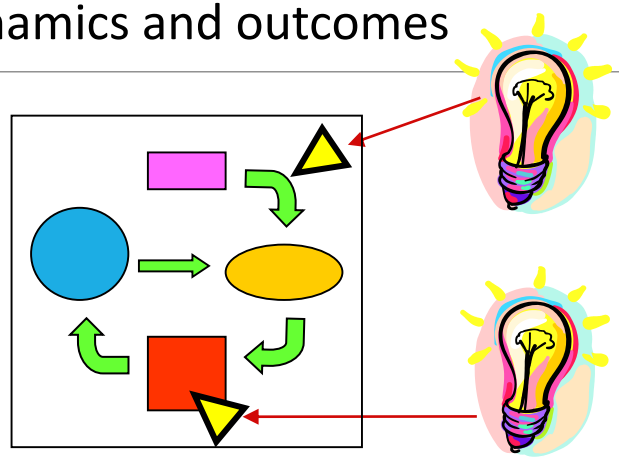
# Innovation Level

New Ideas that can change the System dynamics and outcomes

Identification of options, interventions, changes that can be made at key “leverage points” (entry points) in the system.




# What Sustainability Innovation Means

- ✓New targets and standards
- ✓New materials and technologies
- ✓New controls and feedback mechanisms
- ✓New information flows to new people
- ✓New rules, policies, incentives
- ✓New forms of organization, cooperation, collaboration
- ✓New models, frameworks, environments
- ✓New overarching goals and visions
- ✓New knowledge, skills and capacities
- ✓New mindsets and paradigms
- ✓A NEW WILLINGESS TO TRY NEW THINGS

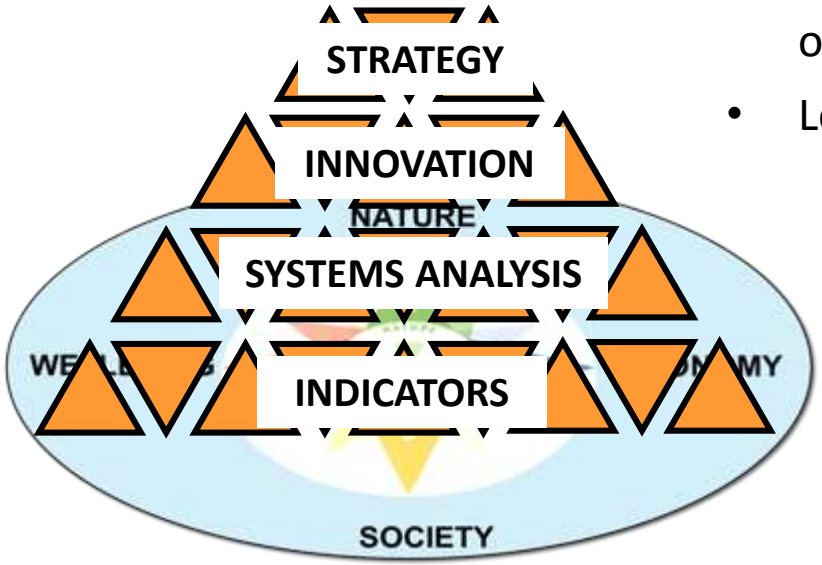

*For an excellent and complete treatment of this part of the process, see Meadows, "Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System," paper available for free download from the Donella Meadows Institute (dated 1997): http://www.donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/*

*Adapted from "Leverage Points: Ways to Intervene in a System," by Donella H. Meadows. Available from www.sustainer.org*


# STRATEGY Level

## Framing of implementation options.

*Change*
*Innovation*
*Cultural*
*Shift*




This part of the process:

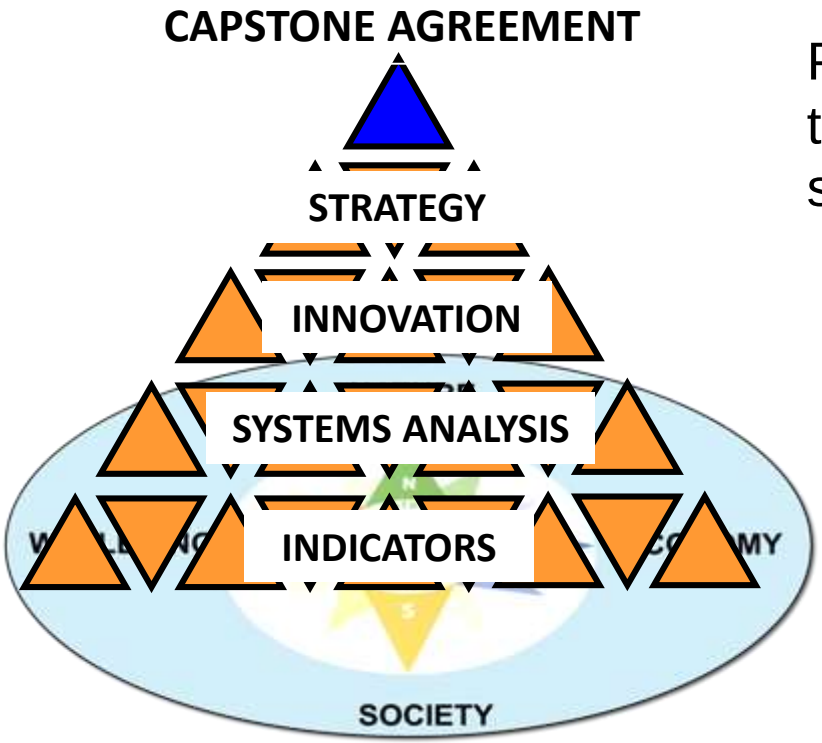
- Can make use of any useful strategic planning tool
- Should consider all the elements required for successful implementation, including any necessary changes in institutional arrangements or organizational culture
- Leads to a coherent "Theory of Change"

**AMOEBA**


**STRATESPHERE**


# The Capstone Agreement

## Making an Agreement to Act Together




Proposal for integrating and supporting the other initiatives in order to create a synergistic and holistic sustainable plan.

*Baltic Countries' Environmental MinistersThe Riga Proposal: Agenda 21 for the Baltic Sea Region*

# VISIS IN PRACTICE

# Case Study:  Belize (1)

## *Background*

A UNDESA team consisting of Inter-Regional Advisor Seleshi Bekele Awulachew and Independent Advisor Alan AtKisson began working with the Belizean government in early 2014, in partnership with the UNDP country office and the Belizean government


The original goal was the **development of a new national sustainable development strategy**

# Case Study: Belize (2)


***How VISIS was used***

VISIS was used "behind-the-scenes" to support the UN team's approach

VISIS was used to **structure the stakeholder consultation meetings**, the questions asked, and the results gathered from bilateral and multi-stakeholder conversations

**THE VISION** in this case was already set: Belize has a national development vision called Horizon 2020, and also wants to be in harmony with the SDGs

# Case Study: Belize (3)

**INDICATORS:** During the consultations, Belizean officials and stakeholders were asked about **key issues and trends** they observed as being of special or critical importance. Also, such trends were mentioned spontaneously. These were later extracted from the discussion notes and recorded under the "Indicators and Trends" section of the resulting worksheet.

**SYSTEMS:** Insights on **key cause-and-effect linkages** also emerged during the consultations. These were also extracted and highlighted on worksheets with special notation (see example on next page).

**Also,** Belizean policy documents were analyzed for their key indicators and systems insights.

# Case Study: Belize (4)

***Example: "Indicators" and "Systems" part of the VISIS analysis***

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***Key Drivers, Indicators, Issues, and Trends Discussed (with Belize Min. of Agriculture):***

*Rising pesticide use*

*Excessive land clearance*

*Uneven regulatory compliance and enforcement*

***Systemic Linkages Identified, Stressed, or Described:***

*Illegal immigration from Guatemala into rural lands* **>>** *Rising unregulated pesticide use* **>>** *Increasing pesticide residues* **>>** *Spike in cancer rates* (*informally observed by health officials)*

# Sub National Level …. Sustainable Pittsburgh

- Regional Outreach Strategy
- Compass Report and Community Indicators Handbook


**Results:**

- Contributed to Launch of Smart Growth Partnership
- Pyramid Workshop to Train Partnership Founders in S.D. and Generate Strategic Options

Source: http://www.sustainablepittsburgh.org/

# Regional Policy Making

- Eleven Baltic nations in a cooperative initiative for regional sustainable development
- Mandate from the Prime Minister level
- Driven through government ministries, but multi-stakeholder in character and governance
- Seeking a new strategic mandate for 2004-2010
- Adopted ISIS / Pyramid to develop a new strategy
- Process to culiminate with Prime Ministers summit in June 2004

*Baltic Countries' Environmental Ministers*
*The Riga Proposal:*
*Agenda 21 for the Baltic Sea Region*

# Latvia, Ministry of Spatial Planning

**2005**

**TYPE OF ORGANIZATION:**

National government

**WHO PARTICIPATED:**

Representatives from nearly all ministries + stakeholders from sectors (business, academia, NGOs, etc.)

**PURPOSE:**

Develop new long-term, sustainability-oriented policies for land use

**RESULTS:**

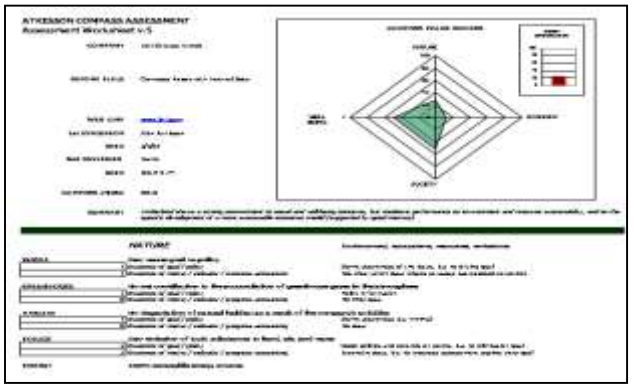
New set of spatial planning principles developed and passed into legislation

*The Capstone Agreement from the Latvia pyramid, with four new sustainability principles for spatial planning. These principles were included in legislation prepared the following week.*

# Corporate Sustainability with Indonesia Business Sectors

GOAL: promote sustainability scheme to business community and assist the companies to have long term commitment toward sustainability, measurable progress, and more accountable sustainability report.

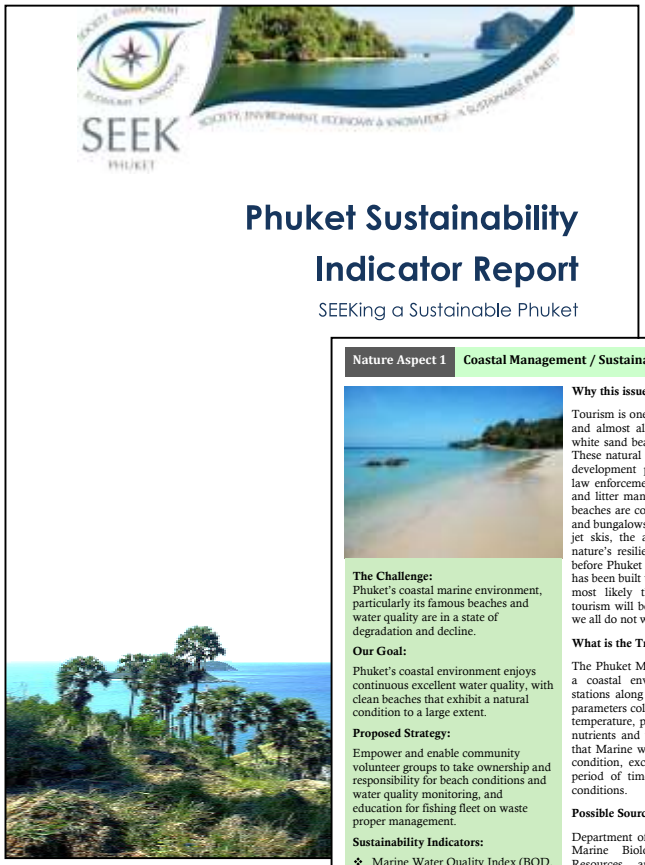
- PT ANTMA tbk (mining industry)
- INCO Mining tbk
- Losari Eco-Resort & Spa
- Indah Kiat Pulp & Paper
- Indonesia Power
- Bank Negara Indonesia (BNI)



- **Result:** All companies were able to develop their own specifically tailored Sustainability Indicators to support companies' sustainability performance.

# Sustainable Phuket Initiative
## Developing Sustainability Indicator Framework

Phuket Sustainability Indicator Report was presented to the Phuket Governor on 22 November 2013….



# Singapore Youth Environmental Envoy Training & Project Development

*Singapore National Environment Agency*
***Youth Environmental Envoy Programme***
*2004-2009*

- Five Years Collaboration with NEA
- Over 275 Youth Leaders from high schools, polytechnics, universities and business trained
- Provide conceptual and practical training on the process of sustainable development, with emphasis being put on cooperative teamwork, communication, networking and systems thinking
- Provide a framework and launching point for the YEEs to develop environmental sustainability related projects
- provide tools and skills to encourage environmental sustainability projects and actions.

# Silicon Valley CSR Training


Sustainability and CSR Managers, Sustainable Silicon Valley, California, USA

Host site: Corporate offices of Advanced Materials, Inc.  Co-Sponsor:  NASA


# Tibet: Women's Empower-ment

# Zambia:  River Management

# Who else has used VISIS?

- **International Training Programs for government officials** financed by **Swedish SIDA** (contracted through Niras, Inc.)
- **Universities** (university sustainability programs) in Sweden, Canada, Thailand, Indonesia, Russia, Australia, and other countries
- **Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI)** — staff is formally trained in the VISIS method and licensed to use a set of tools connected to it, called *Accelerator*
- **Private sector corporations** (as part of their executive training and sustainability strategy development) including e.g. Levi Strauss & Co. (US), National Bank of Indonesia, Al-Sayer Group (Kuwait)

# VISIS Resources

***Book: The Sustainability Transformation***

(AtKisson, Routledge/Earthscan, 2010)*

The *Accelerator* tools (based on the VISIS method)
See **http://AtKisson.com/tools**

**Free simplified version:**
***Accelerator Lite***
**http://AtKisson.com/acceleratorlite**

*Building a VISIS "Pyramid" with water officials in Botswana, 2013*

*Note: The method was originally known as "ISIS" but this was changed to VISIS after the acronum became associated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

# Questions and Comments