

# What is a National Sustainable Development Strategy?

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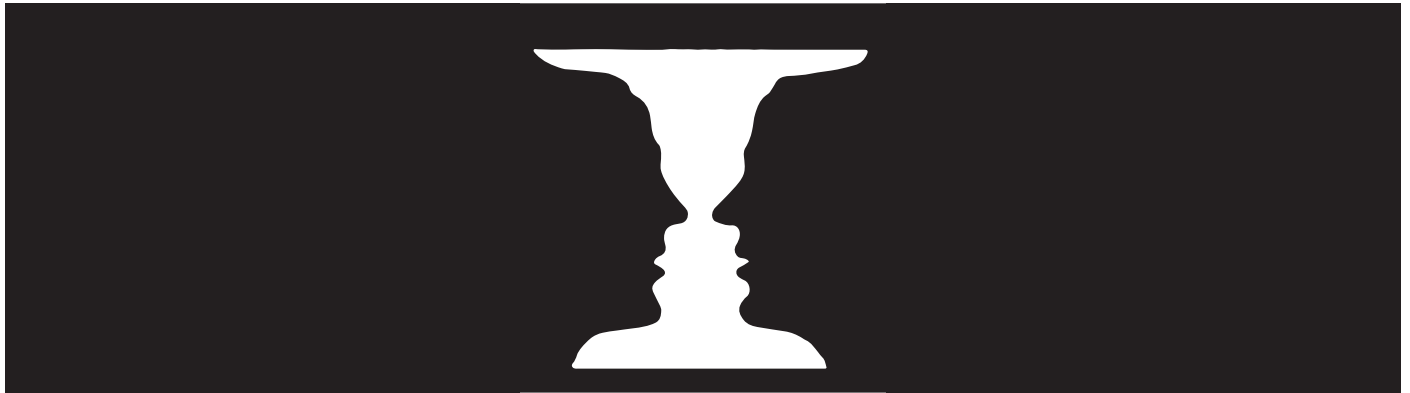


Figure 1: Rubin Vase

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### Summary

The world is changing and we as New Zealanders need to think about what this means for our future. Often strategic thinking only occurs in terms of the three-year election cycle, but this does not prepare us well for the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. Promoting long-term thinking, leadership and capacity-building to manage an uncertain future is critical. To help address these challenges and opportunities, the McGuinness Institute has created *Project 2058*: a vision of what a sustainable New Zealand may look like in the year 2058. The final report in *Project 2058* will be an overarching strategy to reach this vision - known as a National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS). This think piece explores what the written strategy could look like.

Like many terms, National Sustainable Development Strategy conjures up different things to different people, but in our experience, it is best understood in terms of three parts: what is meant by 'Strategy', 'National Strategy' and 'Sustainable Development'. From our perspective 'strategy' refers to a pre-determined set of choices, 'national' refers to a country approach, and 'sustainable development' refers to the Brundtland definition (see boxed text on the following page). By briefly examining three specific questions, and reporting on our research into international best practice, this Think Piece aims to answer the question 'What is a National Sustainable Development Strategy?'

## WHAT IS A STRATEGY?

No discussion on strategy should occur without clarifying the roles of focus and choice in strategy development. This can be explained using the following illusion. The Rubin Vase (see Figure 1) belongs to a set of optical illusions that were developed in 1915 by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin. The illusions present the viewer with two interpretations which are equally valid, but cannot be viewed simultaneously. The differentiation our mind makes between figures and background when presented with an ambiguous image such as the Rubin Vase illustrates how what we choose to focus on is inextricably linked to what we choose *not* to focus on.

Importantly, a strategy is not a plan. The distinction between a strategy and a plan is widely debated, but from our perspective

a plan is usually a forecast based on 'business as usual', being the probable future. A plan is typically prescriptive and fixed over time, whereas an effective strategy, besides requiring rational thought, demands that its authors are ambitious (in scope and aims), creative (in identifying alternative futures), and flexible (in their willingness to alter the strategy over time).

A strategy is often a response to future thinking, which tries to explore the future so that an entity (or a project within an entity) can better position itself in the future. 'Better' could mean better opportunities, bigger profits and/or fewer risks. Therefore, a strategy that does not define one or a number of predetermined choices is arguably not a strategy at all.

In terms of future thinking, strategy is often chosen as a result of exploring the landscape from the perspective of a range of possible futures (e.g. developing scenarios). These are based on our understanding of the future in terms of assumptions about drivers, trends and wild cards. The focus is on events that have a 'low to medium probability' of occurring, but if they do occur they would have a 'high impact'. It is these events that are most likely to challenge us and therefore shape our future. Classic examples would be 'pandemics' and 'sudden and disruptive climate change'. The objective is to explore those events with regard to the long-term future. Therefore a scenario goes forward into time, creating stories with integrity, so that you learn about where the tensions and opportunities exist. So, while scenarios explore the landscape, a strategy marks the path from where we are now to where we want to be (our preferred future).

## WHAT IS A 'NATIONAL' STRATEGY?

A national strategy is a strategy for a country, which by its very nature implies, as in the case of New Zealand, some form of democratic process. Such a process implies a con-sideration of characteristics, facts, assumptions and values which must be considered in terms of future opportunities and threats, and current strengths and weaknesses.

The purpose of a national strategy is therefore to design a tool or vehicle that allows and invites all citizens (including government, business, NGOs and private citizens) to shape the future by pursuing quality governance and leadership and/or

aligning their personal objectives and activities with the broader objectives of the country. In addition, a national strategy can be used to achieve a range of goals, such as providing a vehicle for reinforcing a national brand, developing business clusters and/or fostering a set of shared values. An example of national strategies that have adopted a predetermined vision, in this case sustainable development, are explored in the next question.

## WHAT IS A NATIONAL 'SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT' STRATEGY?

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations have produced two similar definitions:

- A strategic and participatory process of analysis, debate, capacity strengthening, planning and action towards sustainable development. (OECD)
- A coordinated, participatory and iterative process of thoughts and actions to achieve economic, environmental and social objectives in a balanced and integrated manner. (UNDESA)

The key elements of an NSDS centre around a participatory, integrated and long-term strategy designed to meet the needs of current and future New Zealanders. Most people assume that any national strategy, by definition, must be 'sustainable in nature', so the term NSDS could be used interchangeably with the term 'National Strategy'. Some take a very economic view of 'sustainability', whereas others, like the team at the McGuinness Institute, take a broader, wider and longer view of sustainability – being more towards the 'strong sustainability' end of the continuum (see boxed text below).

**The Brundtland Definition of Sustainable Development:**  
development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

**Strong Sustainability:**

Strong sustainability means that natural materials and services cannot be duplicated, whereas weak sustainability means we can replace or duplicate natural materials and services with manufactured goods and services.

**Futures Studies:**

Can be described in terms of 5 Ps and a Q.  
**Probable futures:** forecasting and sometimes prediction  
**Possible futures:** scenarios, risks  
**Preferred futures:** strategies and agendas for change, propelled by innovation and leadership  
**Present trends:** indicators, broad macrochanges  
**Panoramic views:** systems thinking, integral futures, and 'big picture' attempts  
**Questioning:** the necessary questioning and critiquing of all of the above, all of the time. (M. Marien, *Future Survey #4*, 2008)

There is, however, a great deal of historical background to the purpose of an NSDS. Released at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Chapter 8 of Agenda 21 called on countries to adopt NSDSs that build upon and harmonise the various economic, social and environmental policies and plans that are operating in the country. Our first report, *A National Sustainable Development Strategy: How New Zealand measures up against international commitments*, found that since 1997, New Zealand had committed to two international targets to develop an NSDS (introduction by 2002 and implementation by 2005). Government responded by agreeing to produce one in 2001 – and yet in 2008, New Zealand is yet to publish such a document. It is therefore surprising to note that New Zealand is identified by UNDESA as having an NSDS in place (see Figure 2 right).

## OUR RESEARCH

As a way of considering the best way forward for New Zealand, we have explored 'international best practice' in terms of both institutional frameworks (*Report 4a*) and the contents of three NSDSs (*Report 5*). We have then made recommendations as to the optimal institutional frameworks for New Zealand and the implications for a New Zealand strategy. What follows is a brief explanation of what we learnt.

**(i) Report 4a: Institutions for Sustainable Development**

We studied nine institutional frameworks: those of Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Republic of Korea (South Korea), the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. We came to the conclusion that 'high-level central government involvement was necessary in order to progress a successful NSDS'.

**(ii) Report 4: Institutions for Sustainable Development: Developing an optimal framework for New Zealand**

We then examined the current institutional framework in existence in New Zealand and found that government should:

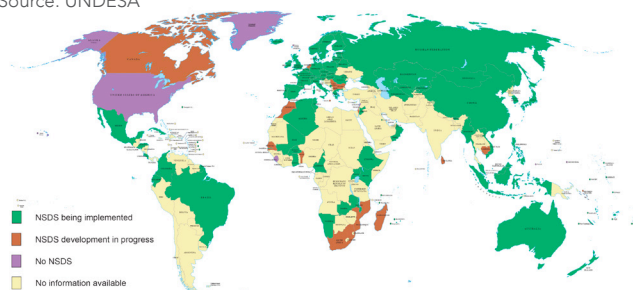
1. Establish an independent advisory body, named a Sustainable Development Council;
2. Designate an existing central government body as the lead decision-making body to progress sustainable development, and finally,
3. Ensure that the institutional framework is sufficiently supported and managed to deliver meaningful and measurable outputs and outcomes.

**(iii) Report 5: The Common Elements of the NSDS: Learning from international experience**

We then reviewed the NSDSs of Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom, and found that all three shared seven common elements: (i) background to the strategy; (ii) vision, including desired outcomes; (iii) principles and values; (iv) priorities; (v) method of implementation; (vi) governance, and (vii) monitoring progress.

Following this research, we conclude that there is an opportunity for New Zealand to develop a strategy that stands out in terms of marketing our values and unique competitive advantages to the world. Perhaps more importantly, an NSDS would provide a mechanism to encourage discussion, build capacity, gain consensus, align initiatives and foster respect, so that New Zealanders commit to the strategy, not because they have to, but because they want what it can deliver.

Figure 2: NSDSs: The Global Picture 2008  
Source: UNDESA



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The McGuinness Institute is a non-partisan think tank working towards a sustainable future, contributing strategic foresight through evidence-based research and policy analysis.

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