

## Working on Social and Ecological Sustainability: A Reflection framework for Cultural Organizations

This framework is developed as a tool for cultural organizations to reflect upon their engagement to 'just sustainability'. The term 'just sustainability' is used to stress both the social and ecological dimension of sustainability; sustainable practices should respect the ecosystems planetary boundaries and at the same time include issues of power and social justice. The framework is based on a research on sustainability transition in the Flemish cultural sector<sup>1</sup>. The research linked theoretical understandings of sustainable development, transition theory and cultural sustainability, to experiences of professionals that are active in the cultural field as well as engaged in the process of sustainability transition. Eight cultural organizations<sup>2</sup> served as case studies. Their insights and experiences led to a better understanding of how cultural organizations can possibly work on social and ecological sustainability. Further it showed what challenges, difficulties and opportunities cultural organizations could possibly encounter when doing so. The framework is developed around the main issues brought up by the participating organizations.

Cultural organizations are understood as organizations active in the cultural sector (art, heritage, socio-cultural work). Examples are art centers, libraries, heritage associations, socio-cultural organizations, etc. Within the research the transition to a sustainable society is understood as an ongoing learning process for the entire society; it is about learning, experimenting and reflection. By means of this framework cultural organizations can reflect upon their role in this learning process. The different issues guide cultural organizations to reflect upon their vision regarding sustainability and the ways in which they translate this into practice and concrete actions, projects, trainings, etc. The indicators for reflection help them to get a better view on its current position and progress regarding its engagement in the transition to a sustainable society; what are their strengths and which issues should be further developed.

The framework contains three indicators for reflection; vision on sustainability and a sustainable future, role in the transition process and realization into practice. The latter indicator is split up into social and ecological actions. They should however not be seen as separated. The social and ecological dimensions are strongly interrelated, social actions might be harmful for the environment or vice versa. Therefore every project/action/training/... should be screened on the social and environmental points of attention presented in this framework. The final section of the framework presents a list of 'tips', which are basic conditions to successfully work on just sustainability that emerged from the research.

### VISION

- ✓ There is a vision on how sustainability is understood
- ✓ There is a vision on how a sustainable future should look like
- ✓ This vision is developed with, and supported by, all the professionals working in the organization
- ✓ This vision contains both a social and ecological dimension and the relation between both
- ✓ Sustainability is transversally integrated into every aspect of the organization
- ✓ There is a developed a vision on the merging of the organizations main role/objective (culture) and the aim to contribute to a sustainable society.

<sup>1</sup> Michiels L. 2014. 'Engaging Society in the Search for a Sustainable Future', master thesis: Human Ecology, Power Culture and Sustainability: Lund University

<sup>2</sup> The art center 'Vooruit', the music club '4AD', the cultural center '30CC', the organization for art education 'De Veerman', the collective of artists, activists and architects 'City Mine(d)', the heritage cell 'K.ERF', the socio-cultural movement 'Repair Café Leuven' and the adult education center 'Vormingplus Kempen'.

## ROLE

- ✓ There is an overview of what is happening in the region regarding sustainability transition: What is well developed and what is missing
- ✓ There is an insight on the organization's own strengths and qualities in relation to sustainability and the way in which the organization can bring an added value
- ✓ Based on the previous reflections, the organizations own role in the transition process is defined;

*Role as 'Pioneer':* creating, dreaming, exploring and inventing sustainable alternatives and futures, and taking up an exemplary role  
= Being the *driver* for change

*Role as 'Colonist':* giving weight and scale to the ideas developed by pioneers, acting as 'bridge builders', 'mediator', 'plumber'  
or 'cross-pollinator' by connecting people and by creating a large support base for change  
= Being an *enabler* of change

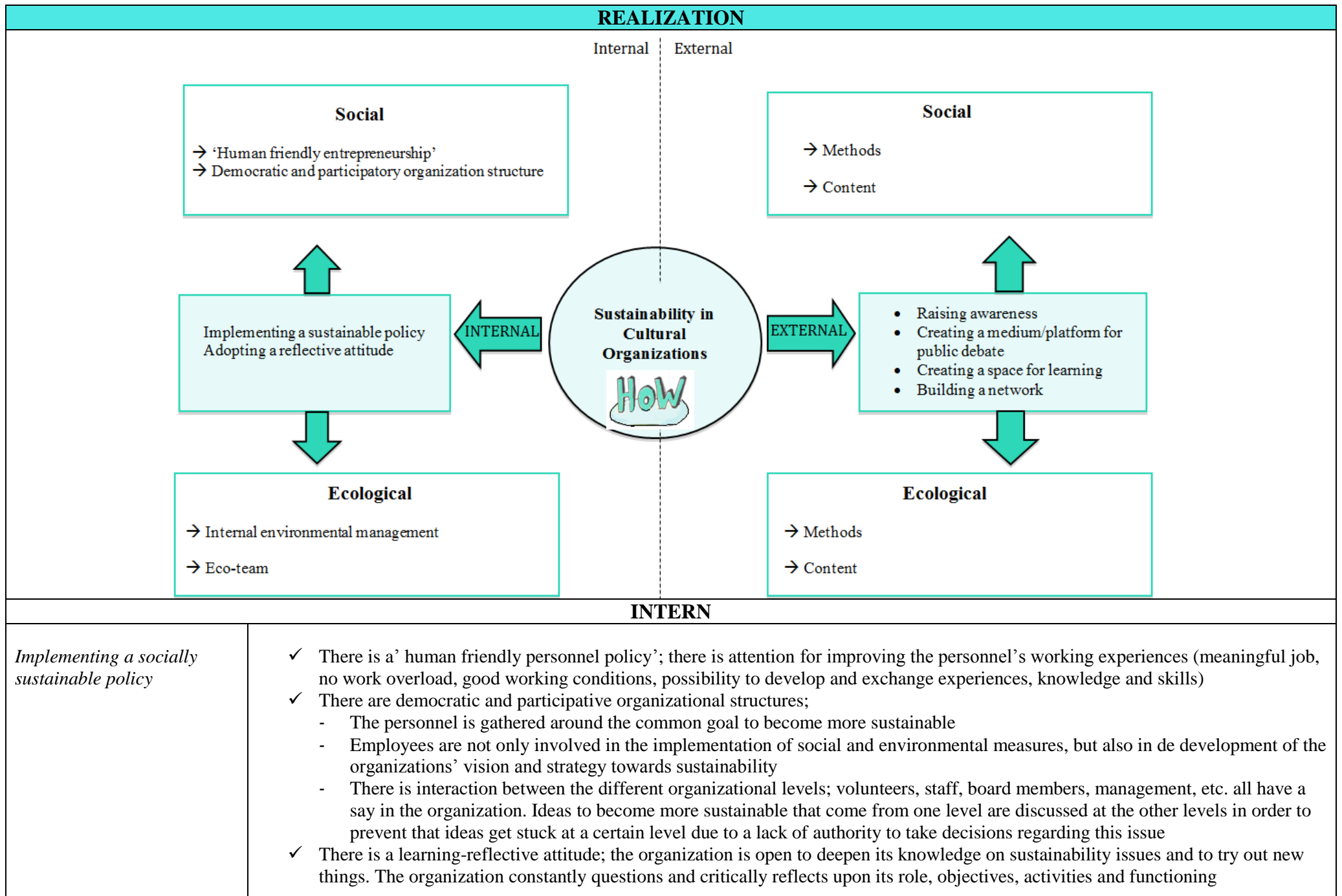
! The research showed that a transition to a sustainable society is only possible when 'pioneers' and 'colonizers' work together, because both need and reinforce each other in bringing about change. Ideally, you take up both roles or collaborate with organizations fulfilling the complementing role

- ✓ There is developed a strategy for which path is followed to bring about change; the path of 'evolution' and/or the path of 'revolution';

*'Evolution'*: stepwise, gradual changes, collaboration (also with proponents of the current system), based on consensus, from inside the system and through the creation of a support base for change.

*'Revolution'*: radical change, experimenting with innovative ideas, resistance, questioning the system, activism and challenging current policies

! The research showed that cultural organizations do not strictly chose for revolution *or* evolution. They are no opposites, instead they follow up and complement each other. Revolution is needed as a trigger to initiate the debate on sustainability. And in order to anchor these revolutionary ideas in society, collaboration is needed. Ideally both approaches are combined within the same organization. Or collaborations are set up with partners fulfilling the complementing role.



<p><i>Implementing an ecologically sustainable policy</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Internal environmental management; there is a well-developed environmental policy which is expressed in; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The infrastructure of the building: there is attention for reducing its environmental impact for example by good insulation, double glazing, maximum recovery of old materials, green energy supplier, etc. ! Who has the responsibility regarding these environmental measures? If you as organization do not have a say in these decisions, reflect upon how you will engage the decision maker in your sustainable vision.</li> <li>- The daily operation; there is a sustainable purchasing policy (ecological cleaning products, second hand materials, fair trade, local and organic products), there is attention for reducing the use of energy (simple routines like closing doors, turning of the lights, heating and computers, etc.), there is attention for recycling, double-side printing, use of environmental friendly promotion material, use of sustainable transport (carpooling, public transport, bike, car sharing) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ These measures/actions are directed towards technical/infrastructural changes (e.g. renewable energy, insulation, etc.) <i>and</i> cultural behavioral changes (consuming less and consuming differently, e.g. rethinking promotion material, exploring ideas of sharing and up-cycling)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ There are people designated as responsables for environmental management; It is clear who is responsible for the organizations internal environmentally conscious management: the entire team or a limited group of personnel. In the latter case, the limited group takes a leading role and develops strategies to engage the entire personnel in the process to become more sustainable</li> </ul> <p>! For tips and checklists regarding environmental management I refer to the instruments developed by ‘Jonge Sla’ and ‘Groene Apen’ available at <a href="http://www.pulsenetwerk.be/category/instrumenten/">www.pulsenetwerk.be/category/instrumenten/</a></p>
---	--

### EXTERNAL

In order to take on a pioneering and/or a colonizing role cultural organizations also work on just sustainability outside the boundaries of their own organization. The research showed that cultural organizations externally take up, all together, four functions;

Reflect upon which of these functions your organization is focusing now and which ones the organization should (further) develop in the future

- ✓ *Raising awareness for socio- ecological issues*; There is an approach developed for raising awareness on socio-ecological issues. The organization takes up an exemplary role by communicating about its internal sustainable policy and by including socio-ecological themes in the cultural offer. It is defined towards which groups/actors the organization takes up this role: the audience, the neighborhood, local authorities, artists, the cultural sector, other sectors, others.
- ✓ *Creating a medium/platform for public debate* on socio-ecological issues. There is an approach developed for creating a meeting place that enables different groups/people to collectively think about a new future. Projects/experiments/performances/artworks are developed as entry points for communication and debate on sustainable themes
- ✓ *Creating a space for (informal) learning*; There is an approach developed for teaching people the basics of the socio-ecological crises and for enabling them to develop the skills and knowledge needed to cope with socio-ecological challenges. Moreover, there is an approach formulated for encouraging people to take up an active role in the search for solutions to change society; experimenting with sustainable alternatives and developing future visions.
- ✓ *Building a strong network*; there is an approach developed for broadening the scope of sustainability initiatives and for bringing people and groups engaged with sustainability in contact with each other.

! The research showed that most of the cultural organizations focus on all four functions, each with their own emphasis.

These functions are developed into concrete social and ecological sustainability measures/actions:

<p><i>Social sustainability</i></p>	<p>There is attention for social justice in the <i>methods</i> used to develop projects, performances, festivals, etc.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The organization engages with its surrounding neighborhood and keeps up-to-date is going on in the neighborhood and society in general</li> <li>✓ There is openness to collaborate with different partners; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The organization is eager to learn from other’s experiences and knowledge and develops collaborations to enables this learning experience</li> <li>- These collaborations go beyond the cultural sector’s boundaries and like-minded ‘green’ partners; partnerships are developed with the neighborhood, the municipality, health care organizations, businesses, NGO’s, education institutions, governmental agencies, etc.</li> <li>- There is a networking attitude; common challenges are addressed together</li> <li>- There is a strategy for sharing gained knowledge and insights within and beyond the cultural sector</li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ The activities/projects/etc. stimulate the public to imagine a different future, to explore sustainable alternatives and solutions and to try them out.</li> <li>✓ There is attention for community development; creating meeting places and strengthening social cohesion.</li> <li>✓ There is attention for broadening to scope of transition initiatives to all levels of society by engaging everyone in the search process for a sustainable society; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sustainability is made understandable, attractive and concrete for a broad public</li> <li>- The organization leaves their building/stage/museum/etc. and develops actions/projects in public spaces</li> <li>- The cultural activities give special attention to the inclusion of disadvantaged groups and approach sustainability from their point of view</li> <li>- The projects/activities/experiments/etc. are based on the principle ‘everyone is expert’. This principle approaches everyone as expert in the transition towards a sustainable society. Children, teachers, citizens, politicians, staff members, board members, people from the ‘North’ or the ‘South’, etc., everyone has knowledge, skills and experiences that are needed in the search for a sustainable society. All these different kinds of expertise and experiences are seen as valuable and the organization draws upon this collective know how.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	<p>There is attention for social issues in the <i>content</i> of the cultural offer;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Projects/festivals/trainings/performances/etc. deal with themes of social justice. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The cultural activities enable people to understand the complexity of social issues such as social justice, inequality, north-south relations, poverty, democracy, migration, human rights, etc. and to see its linkages to environmental issues</li> <li>- The cultural activities encourage the public to reflect upon their position in society/the world and relation to other people.</li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ The organization engages to current social affairs that are covered in the media (ex: elections, civil war, migration, natural disasters in vulnerable regions) and (inter)national campaigns (week of Fair Trade, solidarity actions, etc.)</li> </ul>
<p><i>Ecological Sustainability</i></p>	<p>There is attention for ecological sustainability in the <i>methods</i> used to develop the cultural offer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The environmental impact of every aspect of the cultural offer is critically examined; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reflection on the materials used (promotion, art works, scenery, tools, etc.): reducing use of materials and different use of materials</li> <li>- Reflection on the long term effect and aim of the project/activity</li> <li>- Reflection on the time and location of the activity (accessible by public transport)</li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ The projects/activities raise awareness on environmental issues and encourage environmental friendly behavior: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The organization developed a strategy to communicate about its internal environmental policy</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is a sustainable offer (e.g. sustainable catering, accessibility by public transport, bike parking) and visible actions (e.g. solar panels or beehive on the rooftop, a vegetable garden or insect hotel on the terrace, carpool-bord at the exit, etc.)</li> <li>- There is attention for showing nature's inherent value and for reconnecting people to the landscape</li> <li>- Sustainable choices are made attractive</li> <li>✓ There are collaborations with partners in the region/cultural sector in order to reduce the organization's environmental impact; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Knowledge and experience is exchanged regarding environmental management</li> <li>- Collaborative campaigns/actions are set up</li> <li>- Possibilities of 'collaborative consumption' are explored (e.g. green energy, promotion material, service vehicle)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	<p>There is attention for ecological issues in the <i>content</i> of the cultural offer;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Projects/festivals/trainings/performances/etc. deal with ecological themes; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The cultural activities enable people to understand the complexity of environmental problems such as climate change, climate injustice, access to natural resources, loss of biodiversity, etc. and to see its connection to social issues</li> <li>- The cultural activities stimulate the audience to reflect upon their position in the ecosystem and their relation with the natural environment.</li> <li>- The cultural activities stimulate the audience to reflect upon consumer society, their environmental (un)friendly attitudes and lifestyle</li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ The organization engages with current environmental affairs (natural disasters, global warming, depletion of natural resources, deforestation, discussion on GMO's, etc.) and (inter)national campaigns (world water day, Thursday Veggie-day, climate forum, earth hour, car free Sunday, week of the forest, etc.)</li> </ul>

### TIPS

- ✓ Create a large support base for change. First within the own organization, thereafter among the public.
- ✓ Approach sustainability as a transversal theme throughout the entire functioning (intern and extern)
- ✓ Approach sustainability from a positive perspective: approach social and environmental issues as a challenge instead of a problem. Make sustainable alternatives and a sustainable future attractive and desirable. Don't get discouraged by the current situation instead keep dreaming about a different future!
- ✓ Make the vague and complex term 'sustainability', understandable and easy accessible for the public through small and concrete activities. Use concrete themes as entry point to engage people in the debate and to let people reflect upon their attitudes and lifestyle.
- ✓ Approach every person from its skills and expertise, and draw upon the collective know-how existing in society
- ✓ Start from an open, networking and collaborative attitude
- ✓ Combine strategies of 'evolution' and 'revolution': question injustices within society and experiment with radical sustainable alternatives and at the same time collaborate with different actors of society in order to create a large support base to anchor these radical ideas.
- ✓ Develop the search for a sustainable society in a democratic, inclusive and participatory way
- ✓ Work from a reflective and learning attitude. The transition to a sustainable society should be understood as a continuous learning process. Continuously question your organization, critically reflect upon your work and be open to learn from other's experiences and experiment with new ideas