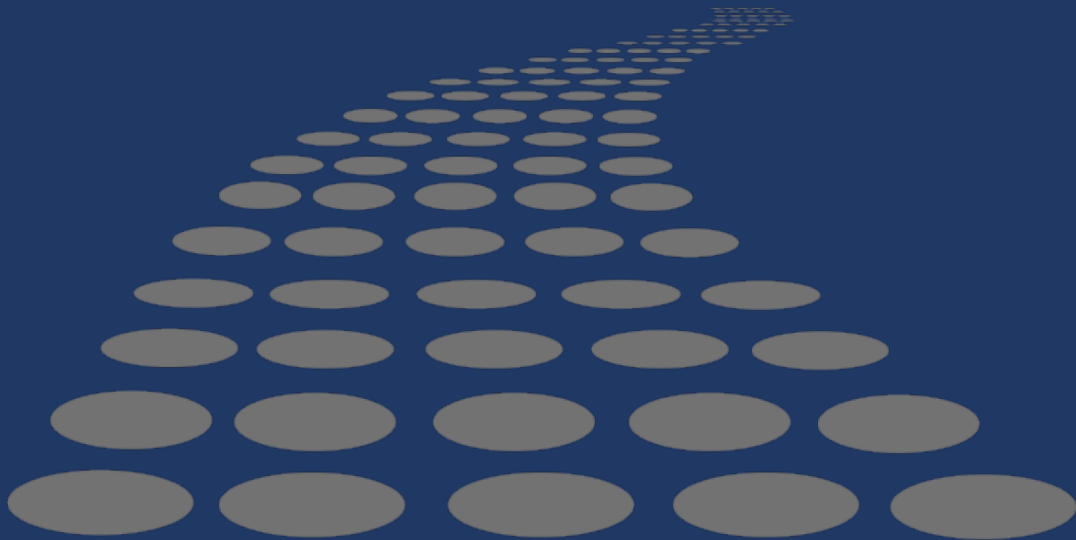


**FIELD GUIDE**

# **THE STEP-UP STRATEGY**

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**CREATING THE FUTURE NOW**



Impact Partners South Africa

2020



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"You can't solve problems created by  
the current pattern of thought  
using the current pattern of thought."

*Albert Einstein*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Managers are typically expected to make meaningful contributions to an abstract future vision while simultaneously delivering on day-to-day operational requirements. In general, managers will acknowledge the centrality of their organisation's vision to its purpose and functions. However, they will just as quickly point out the practical challenges of translating and realising such a vision through specific activities. As such, many organisations settle into focusing on managing daily activities with the hope that if done well this will lead to the desired future vision. However, experience has shown, especially for organisations tasked with creating a positive social impact, that good work does not necessarily translate into the desired outcome for the people affected.

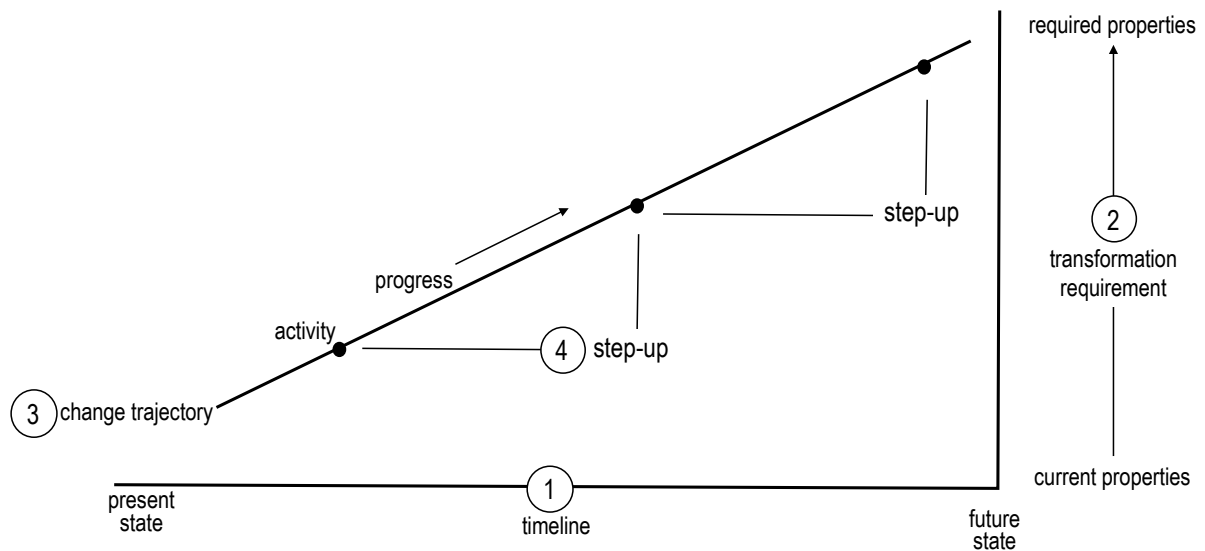
The strategy applied in this field guide was specifically developed to address this problem by improving the alignment of current development activities with the transformation required to reach a desired future vision. Developed from current practices in the field as well as Design and Systems Thinking, the strategy offers both a novel understanding of how to structure operations as well as practices grounded in the wider body of management knowledge.

In the sections that follow, the strategy will be described in terms of its basic components, core principles, further grounding as well as practical application. Note that this document will not offer specific guidance on the use of systems methods or the design process. As such it is assumed that the reader is a competent practitioner in these fields. See Section 7 for additional resources in this regard.

## 2. BASIC COMPONENTS OF THE STRATEGY

As shown in Figure 1, the strategy is built around four basic components. These components will be described in detail in the sections that follow.

Figure 1. The four basic components of the strategy



## 2.1 Present-future state timeline

The present-future state timeline is based on the observation that a typical vision is making a statement on a more desirable and often radically different future. As such, it can be assumed that over a period of time the current state will need to be transformed to better represent the future state as part of that vision.

Therefore, an effective transformative strategy must be based on a fundamental change-over-time requirement to successfully achieve the aim of making the future vision a reality. While this may sound self-evident for any good strategy, it is noteworthy that most organisational strategies focus on describing activities they believe will create the desired change (a causal approach) rather than understanding what the actual change should look like (a transformative approach). The difference between focusing on a causal approach to change and transformation is discussed further in Section 1.2.

Keeping the aforementioned in mind, the future state should not be viewed as an endpoint in itself. Instead, it should be seen as the basis for asking the question, what must be transformed in the current state to actually achieve our vision? From such questions, the implementer can better deduce what must be transformed to create the system needed to deliver on that vision.

Further to this, in reality, the understanding of the vision itself will keep evolving in response to various changes in the environment, thereby making the future state a shifting and dynamic component that needs to be revisited from time to time to reframe the understanding of what needs to be transformed.

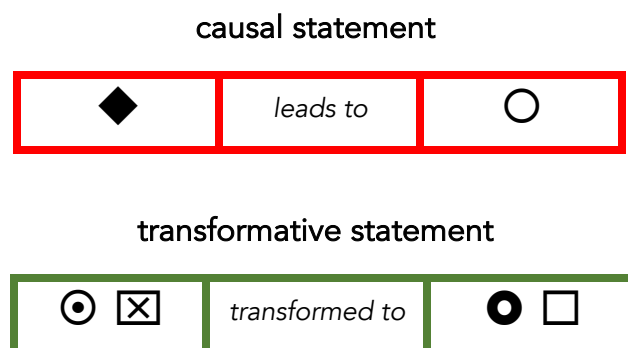
## 2.2 The transformation requirement and desired impact

This component defines the transformation required in itself to achieve the future state. While technically this component describes only one area at a time, it may be one of several that are collectively required to realise the vision.

In noting this, a primary tenant of systems thinking should be kept in mind, namely that while the character of a system is a product of its parts, no part in itself holds the characteristic of the whole nor do such parts necessarily make equal contributions to the whole. This implies that not all areas need equal transformation or are equally important to achieving the desired purpose of the system.

The transformation requirement is also intentionally stated as transforming an entity and its properties rather than a causal process that describes actions (leads to statements). This requirement necessitates noting the current state of an entity and its properties and how the same entity and properties will appear in its transformed state. This can be simply illustrated as follows in Figure 2

Figure 2. Differences between casual and transformative statements



A practical example of a transformation requirement could be– small scale individual communal land farmers without access to sufficient revolving loan facilities transformed to large scale collective communal land farmers with access to sufficient revolving loan facilities. From this example, the transformative impact can be said to rest on changing small scale individual farming activities as well as access to sufficient revolving loan facilities. With the requirement being made clear, it is easier to deduce what needs to be addressed.

With a better understanding of what needs to be transformed, implementers can start to model their approach to creating the desired impact. This model should account for the total number of people affected, what can be done to effectively create the change needed amongst those affected as well as ensuring that the people affected are in fact reached. Additional aspects of impact modelling will be discussed further in Sections 2 and 3.

The impact model also plays an important role in critically examining a proposed activity in terms of its usefulness towards achieving the desired transformation. For example, if the number of affected people is estimated to be 3 000 people but the activity only engages 20 people, it is unlikely that this activity will make a significant contribution to achieving the future vision. Similarly, if the change intervention costs R 3 million to reach 20 beneficiaries, it is unlikely to be scalable to 3 000 people given that the total cost would escalate to R 450 million.

### **2.3 The change trajectory**

When considering the previous two components together it becomes clear that a change trajectory is created, which essentially represents change towards the desired future state over a period of time. While illustrated in Figure 1 as a linear trajectory it is not implied that it should be linear or even exponential in nature. Rather the change trajectory represents a reference point against which an activity can be measured as either making progress towards the desired transformation or not. By using the trajectory as a reference, an activity can be classified either as a step-up in progress or not.

## 2.4 Step-up activities

The final basic component of the strategy is the activity being implemented. As noted, an activity can be compared to the trajectory in terms of its relevance to the desired impact and progress it represents relative to the transformation requirement.

In a sequence of activities, it can also be compared to the previous or possible next activity. Such a sequence does not imply adherence to a pre-planned cascade of activities as one might see in a traditional Gant chart. With this in mind, start-up activities may initially be sequential but could also soon include opportunistic or new activities in response to changes in the context or a better understanding of how to create more value.

With this in mind, the question being asked is if the activity is creating the on-going change needed to deliver on the transformed properties within the expected period of time. If the activity creates progress along the trajectory, even if it is a modest step, it can be described as a step-up activity.

In examining an activity in this manner, it implies that the change trajectory can be used to frame an activity. Framing would direct the implementer to ask questions about how the activity represents a step-up and what would likely be required to make the next activity a step-up activity. The latter is seen as a critical question to ensuring momentum as the next step up activity may require some foundational work, partnerships that take time to develop or other advance preparations.

A further key understanding of framing the current and next-step activities is that current activities inherently hold the seeds to their own failure. What this means is that a current activity, no matter how successful, will in time fail due to its inherent weaknesses being amplified over time or changes in its operating environment that reduce its effectiveness. Therefore, the impetus for the next step-up activity should not come from the decline in performance in the current activity (this is no longer working what is next), but rather the intention to pre-empt that decline (how will this end and what can we do before that happens) to sustain gains already made and ensure on-going progress towards the desired future state.

As noted in Section 1.1, implementers following a trajectory over a period of time will also start to ask questions that confirm the trajectory is still correct in terms of an evolving description of the future state. This implies that framing activities remain an interactive process, which in itself exercises a team's on-going insights into all four basic components.

### 3. CORE PRINCIPLES GUIDING THE STRATEGY

When working with the basic components of the strategy the following core principles should be kept in mind in order to optimise the effectiveness of the strategy in general.

- I. **The strategy focuses on creating the future now**– as noted in the basic components, the strategy is working towards achieving the future state by framing current activities and referencing them relative to that goal. This can be seen in the strategy as an unapologetic narrative to achieve the future state.
- II. **The strategy focuses on creating material value for real beneficiaries**– for change to be seen as meaningful and material it must create value from the point-of-view of the real beneficiary. By extension, this implies that only the beneficiaries can validate growth, achievements, and success as material.
- III. **The strategy requires significant gap-spanning action**– the current-future state gap demands engagements that involve multiple disciplines to design radical innovations and proposals, which can be translated into multiple step-up activities that over a period of time span the gap.
- IV. **The strategy requires an on-going interactive process**– given that change is not only present in the environment but also amongst beneficiaries, there must be a regular and ongoing process of engagement to obtain feedback, validate ideas and activities, reframe needs, measure progress and evolve the understanding of the future state.

## 4. GROUNDING OF PRACTICES

### 4.1 Insights gained from direct field observations

This strategy was developed from direct observations made during a number of community-based project assessments and the resulting insights into how they created tangible gains towards a future vision.

From this work, it was noted that projects which continuously referenced and tracked a strong future vision appeared to have a clearer sense of what was required to meaningfully transform the current situation for their beneficiaries. Moreover, in projects where the future vision was particularly well defined, this vision was used to positively reframe the nature of the narrative around the project and in particular its beneficiaries. This narrative, in particular, would challenge deficit labels replacing them with future now terms, for example, communal land farmers rejecting the label of small-scale emerging farmers and taking on the behaviours of large-scale commercial farmers.

This strong sense of how things should be transformed also informed actions that preemptively lay the groundwork for next-step activities. This resulted in more organic and agile activities. As such, while the direction or trajectory for change was clear, the activities pursued to realise the future vision were not strictly bound to a predetermined chain of events or solutions. That said, this flexibility was not the antithesis of control nor did it denote a lack of structure or process, given that the trajectory remained the central reference for judging and taking action.

These future-orientated projects could be said to be more impact-orientated given the manner in which they made tangible progress towards a future state, while also showing intentional adaptability to maintain progress towards that future. These practices translate into a noticeable benefit for the people affected, which generally was more material, sustainable and transformative in nature.

Whereas these observations are in themselves not revealing new technical knowledge in the field of creating value and a positive impact, the manner in which these practices are

used in concert offers unique insights and novel opportunities for the application and practical use of several well-described Systems and Design Thinking practices. In the sections that follow, some of the most relevant systems and design practices will be explored in brief.

## 4.2 Application of Systems Thinking

The systems practices observed in the field are similar to Ackoff's description of creating the future now using Interactive Planning and Idealised Design. This includes a strong and radical understanding of the future state, applying gap eliminating innovations using multidisciplinary teams, and taking a systems perspective around proposing interventions.

On the latter, Ackoff particularly emphasised the understanding that no individual part holds the characteristic of the whole. On this basis, Ackoff critiqued the use of analytics, essentially the practice of breaking into parts of the whole and then analysing those parts individually with the aim of improving the whole (see Box 1).

### Box 1. The challenge with analytics

To illustrate the problem with an analytic approach, Ackoff often noted that if you sourced all the best individual parts for a car in the world today (such as an engine, gearbox, steering and so on) and then attempted to assemble the best car in the world from these parts, you would have nothing more than a warehouse full of expensive parts that could not be assembled into a functional car. Similarly, the function of a part is inherent to the purpose of the system, for example, an off-road vehicle has suspension, wheels, and engine designed to function on poor roads and trails, while a Formula 1 car has parts designed to make it travel as fast as possible on specially designed race

Ackoff asserted that to improve the current system to achieve the desired future state, the current system needs to be transformed to reflect the characteristics and properties of that future system. This inherently necessitates a sound understanding of the properties of both the current and future systems.

This approach underscores that the change requirement must be transformative in nature, meaning one is not trying to

improve the current characteristics of the system (fix the deficits) but rather transform them into the requirements dictated by the desired future state. Checkland stresses the importance of this approach in his Soft Systems Methodology, in which he notes that a clear understanding of how an entity must be transformed is critical to a successful

outcome. This given that it allows the would-be improver to logically deduce what must be done in order to achieve that new state.

In Checkland's approach to transforming a system, an entity and its inherent properties are described both at the start and end of the process (as shown in Figure 2). For example, small scale subsistence farmers to large scale commercial farmers. The latter differs from "leads to" statements that assume an input will lead to a specified outcome, for example, entrepreneurial skills training will lead to the creation of more small businesses and local employment opportunities.

#### **Box 2. Combining systems and design practices**

Although systems and design practices evolved largely independently of each other, there is increasing recognition of their common and complementary practices. Checkland's Soft System Methodology, Ackoff's Idealised Design and IDEO's design process are often cited as examples of this convergence between systems and design thinking. Approaches such as whole-system design, systems-orientated design, and design for development illustrate how systems and design thinking can be applied in concert.

The centre of this convergence is the understanding that both approaches depart from the premise that problems cannot be solved using the perspective that brought about the current state. In addition, soft systems methods that focus on human activity follow a similar line of reasoning to design when they place people affected by a problem in the central role of informing the design of interventions.

Given this approach, the description of transformation is only dealing with the what, without preconditioning the "how". In comparison, "leads to" statements make certain assumptions and as such are generally predetermining the how. This can be viewed as following a closed-problem solving process, whereas a transformation approach would represent an open-problem solving approach. Focusing on such distinctions is important given that open-problem solving methods are considered to be more effective in dealing with difficult-to-solve problems as such methods typically create better interventions given their focus on creating as much value for the people affected as possible. Moreover, both soft

systems and design practices value an open problem-solving approach. With this in mind, Ackoff noted that although the two-disciplines evolved independently they shared many practices that could be applied concurrently to strengthen the process being followed (see Box 2).

This section only briefly explored applying Systems Thinking within the strategy. From the few practices highlighted, it is clear that implementers of the strategy can benefit significantly from using systems knowledge in the strategy.

### 4.3 Application of Design Thinking

Design Thinking is centred around the belief that if you create value from the point-of-view of the person affected one can significantly improve their experience around a given problem. Therefore, design reasoning differs from traditional reasoning in that it starts with defining value from the perspective of the affected person and then uses that definition to frame the “*what*” and the “*how*” of the process to create value. This person-affect led approach to design is often referred to as Human-Centred Design.

Several elements of the design process were observed in the projects assessed and as such design thinking is inherent to the four basic components of the strategy as it directs both the understanding and creation of material value for the people affected. However, as confirmed during the assessment, such design thinking requires an on-going process of engagement to gain meaningful insights into what can create value and how that changes over a period of time, getting feedback on ideas, validating proposals and helping assess what was achieved.

## 5. INITIAL PREPARATIONS

This section will examine some of the preparations that should be considered before starting with a step-up strategy.

## 5.1 Confirming the application of the strategy is valid

This strategy is best suited to a scenario where stakeholders are attempting to create material impact within a specific community<sup>1</sup> using a well-defined vision of the future<sup>2</sup>. That said, the strategy does not need to be approached as an end in itself but can be developed in parallel with current activities with the aim of merging the two streams when appropriate.

## 5.2 Laying the foundations for effective engagement

Given the strategy's use of a design process, it is heavily dependent on effective engagements to generate and share value data<sup>3</sup>. As such, this makes establishing a manageable system for continuous engagement vital to working with the strategy. Therefore, before applying the strategy, implementers should consider how they will develop and manage their capacity for on-going engagement.

To help establish a manageable system for engagement, the implementer could explore partnering with local organisations or working within existing forums that already exist for a defined group. Ideally, the design process should merge as far as is practically possible with exiting opportunities for engagement in order not to burden stakeholders. That said, the implementer should keep in mind that the aim is not to limit contact to the shortest possible time but rather to avoid unnecessarily asking the community to attend yet another event to talk about their concerns and problems. How this could be practically achieved is explored in the example below.

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<sup>1</sup> **Specific communities** refer to a defined community living within a specific geographic area, for example, youth attending high schools in Ipopeng township rather than the community of Ipopeng.

<sup>2</sup> **A future vision** is a broader and less abstract than what is typically described in an organisational vision. A good future vision should be strongly future-orientated (creates a realistic but significant gap), radical (it strongly redefines present thinking or beliefs) and is aspirational (it helps describe a meaningful achievement). It is specific enough that it can inform the systemic properties needed for it to become a reality without specifically detailing the "how".

<sup>3</sup> **Value data** is a term used to describe data collected or shared as part of the design process, this includes data from interviews to gain insights from those affected as well as getting feedback on ideas and proposals. Value data differs from technical data in that the latter represents aggregated such as population and economic statistics.

## Example 1. Partnering to help to collect and share value data

An Intervention to prevent, reduce, and provide care for substance abuse amongst youth in Ward 12

defined group	proximity	possible partners or forums
District managers (health/social/education)	district office	monthly management meetings
Church leaders	community	quarterly religious leaders' forum meeting
Shebeen owners	community	auxiliary workers from substance abuse NGO
Community policing group	community	community policing forum (drug and gang committee)
Primary Health Care clinic nurses	community	clinical mentor sessions on Fridays by local NGO
High school teachers Ward 12	direct contact	monthly teachers meeting/ life-skills NGO
Treatment and rehabilitation team	direct contact	in-treatment groups/ out-patient support groups
Parents of school-going youth Ward 12	direct contact	Parent-school meetings/ community worker home visits
Parents of youth abusing substances Ward 12	beneficiary	social and auxiliary workers substance abuse NGO
School-going youth Ward 12	beneficiary	youth care workers from NGO
Out-of-school youth Ward 12	beneficiary	youth care workers from NGO
Youth abusing substances Ward 12	beneficiary	care and support group run by NGO

As implementers start to partner two needs will likely arise. The first will be around the initial orientation, training, and on-going mentoring of partners in the design process. The second need will come from establishing the capacity to translate the data into insights, generate ideas and get feedback as well as develop and validate proposals.

To effectively address these two needs will require one or more process co-ordinators to be identified, or if people capacity is limited recruited, before starting the strategy. The primary role of these individuals should be to lay the necessary foundations with key partners as well as ensure all the engagement activities are effectively co-ordinated with partners.

### 5.3 Gaining traction and building support

The design process seen within the strategy is relatively time consuming and therefore requires a certain level of commitment from the implementer, partners, and affected stakeholders. Given this, the initial engagements with affected stakeholders should help to highlight the value of the design process, their central role to making it a success and the need for them to be part of an on-going process that may take several months before projects or initiatives are started.

From systematic reviews of projects using these intentional inclusion methods, it has been shown that the engagement process should not be rushed. As such the implementer must make sufficient room to allow the affected people time to evolve their understanding of the situation and engage with ideas. This should, however, not prevent the use of the strategy when there is a short-term pressure to act, as the strategy can be initiated in parallel to traditional projects and merged later.

A further related concern is that implementers should be alert to incorrectly assuming that these engagements take long because the people affected do not know what they need, cannot articulate what they need, or are not sufficiently educated to understand the complexity involved.

Research findings have repeatedly challenged these assumptions noting that when ordinary community members are provided with actionable information and sufficient opportunities to make sense of the question at hand, they can provide significant insights into creating interventions to a degree that neither technical analysis nor expert knowledge alone could provide.

The potential in using inclusion methods becomes even more critical when accountability for community resources comes into play, either as government-funded services or through compensatory mechanisms such as community-held shares. In these settings, inclusion methods are often associated with deliberate democracy and improved local accountability given its use of more robust and intentional engagement. This not only results in better-designed interventions but perhaps more critically, a higher level of trust that the implementers are acting on the behalf of those affected.

Despite the fact that intentional inclusion methods offer many advantages for designing interventions, it may challenge entrenched notions of the supremacy of technical data to define actions and experts to map the best course of action. Implementers can reassure stakeholders with this concern that while the design process is working towards enriching and validating proposals using value data, the design process still requires the use of mix methods that draw in technical data and expertise as part of a multi-disciplinary team

approach, which will be discussed further in Section 6. As such, the change for those working with technical data is who ultimately defines material value and how one validates proposals to be implemented in terms of creating value for those affected.

Similarly, certain community structures or leaders may feel threatened by the process given the belief that they adequately (we know what is needed) or legitimately represent those affected (we have the formal right to speak on their behalf). One approach to working with these stakeholders is to help reduce the perceived threat to them. This can be achieved by offering to share the insightful and actionable data collected to aid them in their leadership roles, especially in supporting projects and initiatives that bring about significant change.

That said, some powerful actors may still wish to have their interests accommodated even when it contradicts what is required to address a need. Along the same line, democratising community data may pose a different kind of threat to powerful actors who may wish to control access to that data.

Given these process and political factors, as well as other practical considerations, the implementer may need to initially limit the scale of the strategy. Such limitations may be viewed as a positive constraint as it creates the opportunity for the implementer to develop their management systems, recruit and capacitate partners as well as build the trust needed amongst a larger group of stakeholders to engage on a wider scale. That said, this scaled approach should itself follow a specific strategy to optimise the traction and support gained. One well-documented approach that can be used to this end is Small Wins (see Box 3). In general, in following a Small Wins approach the implementer may initially seek to identify an area that is:

- Relatively meaningful– it has relative importance and represents meaningful work;
- Reasonably visible to others– enablers or detractors can see achievements made;
- Likely that the problem can be successfully addressed in a reasonable timeframe– creating a positive sentiment, building trust and momentum towards larger-scale engagement; and

- Not a major area of concern that involves a large number of stakeholders with many conflicting ideas– the aim initially is to build trust using the positive sentiment created around meaningful progress. This trust can help later in addressing more challenging areas.

### Box 3. Characteristics of Small Wins

Termeer and Dewulf reviewed the use of a Small Wins approach in the context of wicked or difficult-to-solve problems. They identified four core characteristics relevant to optimising Small Wins. The table below summarises their description of these characteristics as well as the associated indicators.

Small Win characteristic	indicator description and examples		contra-indicator description and examples	
<b>concrete outcomes</b>	The activity becomes part of the lived experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Visible results</li> </ul>	The activity is framed nicely framed promises and creative ideas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Promises and ideas only</li> </ul>
<b>in-depth changes</b>	The activity creates an in-depth change for those affected.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Second- and third-order change</li> <li>▪ Radical new practices</li> </ul>	Taking fast and easy steps to address a problem by cherry-picking what to address.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ More of the same</li> <li>▪ Quick wins</li> <li>▪ Low hanging fruit</li> </ul>
<b>moderate importance</b>	Working at a level that effectively meets complexity and turbulence to start seeding transformative change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Micro or local level engagement</li> <li>▪ Intermediate outcomes</li> </ul>	Using best practices as ready-to-use solutions that do not require improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Large scale</li> <li>▪ Best practice</li> </ul>
<b>positive judgement</b>	There is a focus on shared ambitions. Activities are informed by the overall sense of direction towards a global vision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Improvement</li> <li>▪ Step forwards</li> <li>▪ Related to a shared ambition</li> </ul>	The activity overshadows or damages the aims of others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Small losses for others</li> </ul>

Adapted from Termeer & Dewulf (2018)

## 6. THE STEP-UP STRATEGY

The four components of the Step-up Strategy can be viewed as representing the two core considerations for creating the desired value, namely what must be addressed and how it should be addressed. To define what needs to be addressed the first two components of the strategy leverages off Ackoff and Checkland’s systems methods to define a radical future vision to help understand what must be transformed within the current system to create meaningful change. The second two components apply the design process to guide

how this will be achieved using a series of activities that make meaningful progress to the desired end-point.

Given these overall process references, the implementer should ensure they have a sufficient understanding of these methods to fully engage with the Step-up Strategy.

## **6.1 Start with a clear future vision**

Given that the future vision is at the heart of defining what must be transformed as well as if an activity is creating progress towards that transformation, the primary aim of this first step is to develop a rich and evolving understanding that resonates with those affected both at the start and during implementation.

### **6.1.1 Defining a future vision**

The future vision is a clear statement of the desired future state from the perspective of the people affected. It should help make clear the following.

- What would be considered a radical improvement from the current situation?
- The material experiences that would underpin achieving that future state.
- The properties of the future state that would deliver on those experiences for the people affected.
- What should be transformed to create the future state properties?

For the reasons discussed in Section 4.3, it is likely that the initial work using the strategy will be restricted to a narrow area of concern. Keeping in mind that no single area holds the characteristic of the whole and that not all areas are equally important to achieving a vision for the whole, the implementer will need to be mindful of how they apply their Systems Thinking.

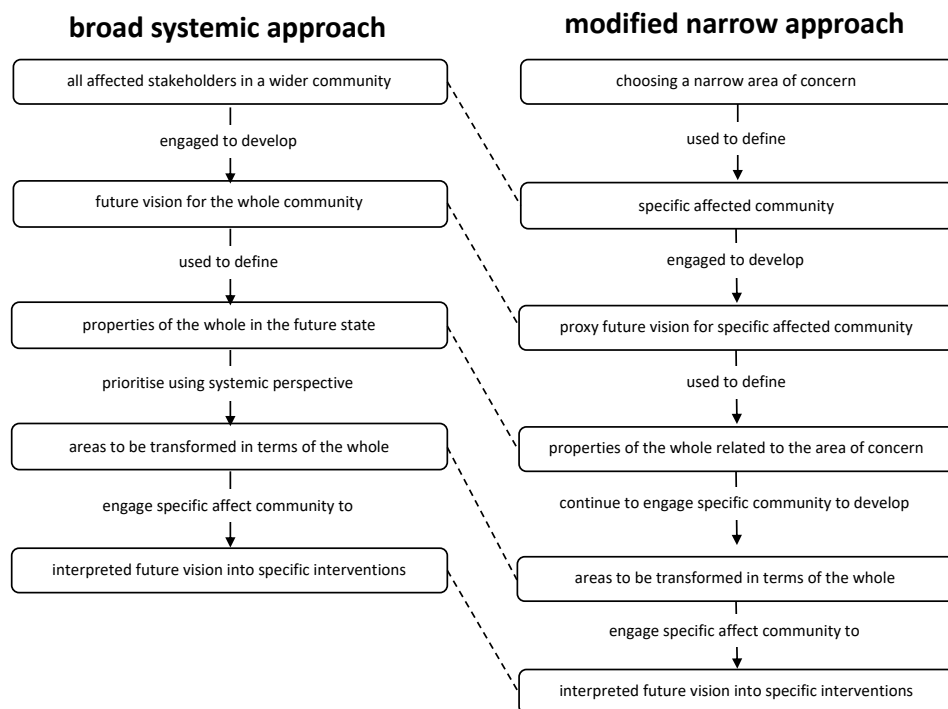
Ideally, the future vision would be defined at a community level. However, as seen in the field observations, it may not always be practically feasible to engage a whole community at the start. This limitation can be overcome by the implementer using a proxy future vision,

which is developed around a narrow area of concern using the inputs of a specific affected community (see Footnote 1 on Page 12). This proxy future vision must still be robust enough to make sense of the desired future state as a whole, although it is now limited to the perspective of that specific affected community. Having a good sense of the future state, the implementer can move to define the overall system properties required, which in turn would be applied to the work within the narrow areas of concern.

In this modified approach, deciding on the narrow areas of concern will be more intentional when compared to prioritising intervention areas to create the best overall effect, as seen within a broader systems approach. As such, the choices made in the modified approach are more likely to be informed by various practical or strategic considerations.

Notwithstanding this, the implementer is still encouraged to apply a systems approach to creating the best overall effect. Once a narrow area of concern is chosen and the proxy future vision developed, the specific affected community can be further engaged to help define what needs to be done to address that concern. In Figure 3 below, this understanding of the board systemic approach compared to the modified narrow approach is shown.

**Figure 3. Working within a future vision in the modified approach**



In summary, the modified approach is only suggested where it is initially impractical to work at a community level or where a Small Wins type approach can aid in making progress in complex situations. That said, the implementer should in due course take active steps to involve more specific affected communities to make the vision more inclusive. This implies that the transformative requirements and change trajectories will also need to be periodically reframed to reflect the evolving understanding of the future vision. Beyond that, as the process becomes more inclusive and trusted, the implementer may consider transitioning to a broader systemic approach.

### **6.1.2 The timescale for a future vision**

Implementers and stakeholders alike may want to clarify the timescale for the future vision—essentially asking how far in the future should the vision go?

The first part of answering this question would largely depend on the scale of the concern being addressed. The second part needs to take into account the purpose of the vision itself. Given that the purpose of the future vision is to represent a truly radical and material change, this will unlikely to be achieved in the short to medium-term timescale, such as 3 to 5 years. Achievements at this scale would be at the level of specific activities and initiatives (see Section 6.4). On the other side, defining a vision so far into the future that it contains properties that cannot be used to guide the present work is equally unhelpful. While there are organisations that follow extreme long-term visions, such an approach would not be practical in the context of using the Step-up Strategy.

### **6.1.3 How to draft the future vision**

To allow the future vision to be fully developed the affected community needs to think beyond the current state and its associated constraints. This can be achieved by asking the affected community to imagine a radically different scenario in which their concerns were addressed. This scenario should be developed without the constraints of the current situation. That said, the future scenario must avoid using science fiction, in other words including technology does not exist or cannot reasonably be created within the given

intervention timeframe, ideas that are in conflict with current legislation or could be considered ethically questionable.

To further help interpret the scenario into a future vision, the facilitator should guide the contributors to help describe:

- A significantly more desirable state than the present;
- A fundamental change in direction;
- The changed experiences of the affected people in that future and why its material;
- How the scenario can be made more participative or inspire others to pursue; and
- The experiences or properties that should be prioritised to achieve the vision.

In the example below, a proxy future vision is shown with its various components highlighted. The facilitator and contributors (both affected and technical) should be able to explain the properties identified as well as the measures of success, for example, what intergenerational prosperity looks like for this community. To ensure there is a shared understanding and agreement around a given property, the facilitator should document both the vision and description of its properties<sup>4</sup> for future reference when framing activities.

### Example 2. A proxy future vision for using communal land

Creating intergenerational economic prosperity through the sustainable use of communal land allocations in a collective, large-scale, high-return, technology-driven, integrated farming business owned and managed by local farmers, that provides meaningful well-paid work for skilled local youth and service businesses as part of its local, national and global operations.

helps to clarify the...  radical improvement  properties to deliver experiences/ transformation areas  new experiences

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<sup>4</sup> A **property** is an attribute or characteristic that makes up a particular system's behaviour.

#### **6.1.4 Checking-in on the future vision**

As discussed previously, the future vision is not a static target either due to changes in the implementation environment or through the process of drawing in more specific affected communities. This implies that periodically, the implementer would want to revisit together with affected stakeholders the future vision to determine if it still meets the requirements to create radical change. These reviews would also be the ideal time to reconsider both the desired properties of the future state as well as if the prioritisation of certain priorities is still valid.

### **6.2 Identify the transformation requirements**

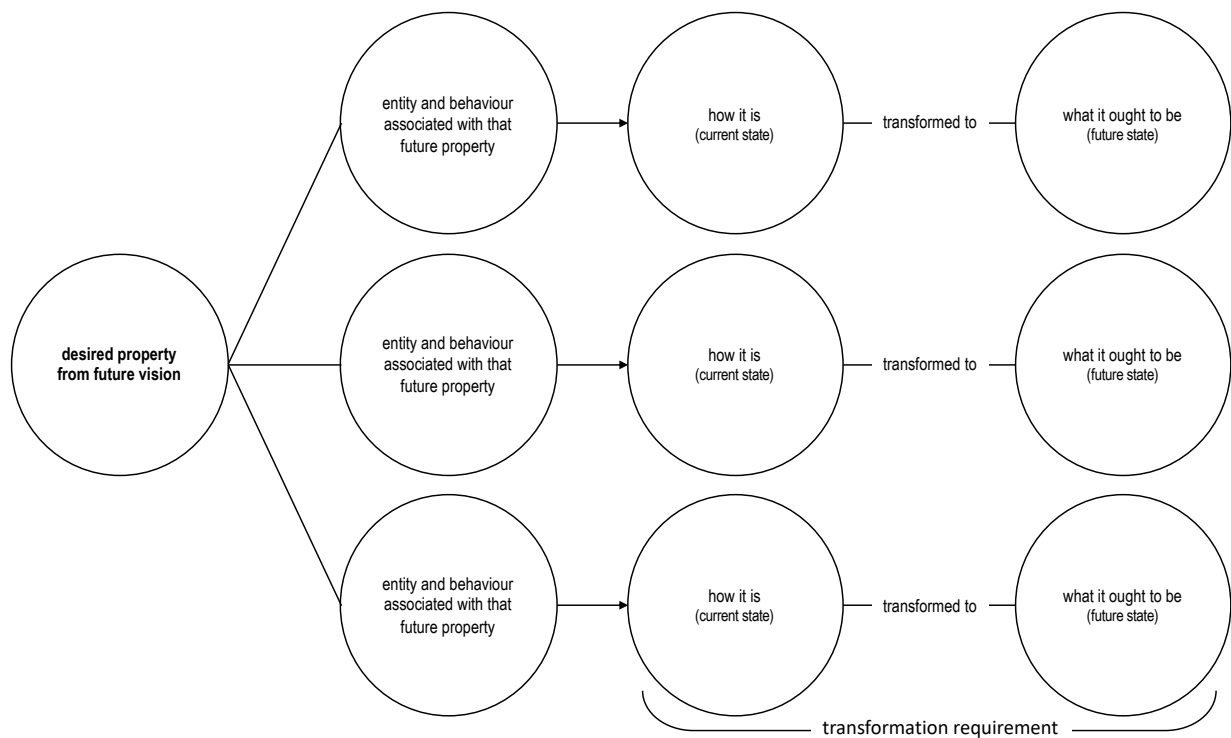
At this point in the process, the implementer has a defined future vision and clear descriptions of its properties. In this next step, the implementer unpacks these desired properties into areas that must be transformed.

#### **6.2.1 Defining a transformation requirement**

Working from a desired propriety of the future state, the implementer can determine which entities in the current state need to be transformed to better reflect that desired property. A key mechanism for the step-up strategy is to link activities to this transformation requirement to help narrow the current-future state gap and as such contribute to achieving the future vision, as illustrated in see Figure 4.

From Figure 4, it can be deduced that the transformation requirement is based on the transformation statement, which describes the transformation the entity will undergo from its current state to a future state. Referring back to Section 2.2 and Figure 2, it should be kept in mind that the same elements appear on both sides of the transformation statement as shown in Example 3.

Figure 4. Linking the desired property to a transformation requirement



Example 3. From property to transformation requirement

**Desired property:** Large-scale sustainable commercial farming on communal land.

**The entity to be transformed:** Revolving agricultural loan facilities.

**The entity to be transformed:** Sustainable land use.

**Transformation statement:** [⊙] access to revolving loan facilities based on [⊠] single crop off-take agreements for communal land farmers to [●] access to revolving loan facilities suitable to [□] self-directed large scale farming of multiple crops by communal land farmers.

**Transformation requirement:** Establish a new type of revolving loan facility that enables diverse large scale commercial farming on communal land.

## 6.2.2 Checking-in on the transformation requirement

As the implementer and contributors' insights evolve and change there will be a need to review the knock-on effect that may have on the various components of the strategy. With this in mind, the implementer will need to check-in on the transformation requirements to ensure they are still aligned to the future vision.

## 6.3 Listing trajectories and desired impact

Each of the transformation requirements identified can be seen as part of a change trajectory that essentially becomes a reference point against which the implementer can judge if an activity is bringing the affected community closer to desired change and if subsequent activities represent additional progress towards the transformation end-point.

Practically this means that the implementer working with their contributors will decide on a set of trajectories they believe best represent the requirements to achieve the future vision.

### 6.3.1 Modelling impact as part of using a trajectory

Each of the activities linked to a trajectory can be tested in terms of the required impact they must create to meet the transformation requirement end-point. By considering impact, the implementer can make the trajectory more tangible in terms of judging an activity. With this in mind, it is suggested that impact is modelled using the following three related questions.

Table 1. Components of a basic impact model

component	question to be addressed
breath	What is the total number required to create the desired impact in relation to the end-point? If representing people, the total number would refer to the number of people affected by the concern.
reach	How will the implementer ensure the people being targeted will actually be reached? The approach should include as many of the real beneficiaries as possible to avoid wasting resources that may not contribute to the desired impact.

component	question to be addressed
depth	<p>What is the intervention that will effectively create this change?</p> <p>There should be evidence that the intervention will work both technically and in terms of the affected people.</p>

As can be noted from Table 1, a key function of the impact model is to test if a proposed activity is capable of creating impact. For example, if an activity only reaches 20 of 3 500 affected people, questions related to scalability, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness may need to be considered. Similarly, an intervention could be technically capable of creating the required change but may offer little traction amongst those affected, which will reduce its real-world impact.

### 6.3.2 Reviewing the impact model

As with the previous two components of the strategy, there is a need to periodically review the impact model. While the model would also be affected by changes made to the future vision and transformation requirements, it may also be influenced by other changes such as changes in population or new scientific evidence for effective interventions. Given this, the implementer should periodically review their impact model design to ensure it is both aligned to the future vision and technically current.

### 6.4 Working with step-up activities

As the final component of the strategy, step-up activities are not only responsible for delivering concrete changes but also to do so consistently along a path to meeting the transformation requirement. To achieve this concrete and consistent progress, proposed activities need to be framed in a specific way to ensure that it offers the advantages of a step-up activity. However, before considering how to frame a good step-up activity, the implementer needs to keep in mind how this activity is grounded in systems and design thinking practices.

Within this practice framework, the activity essentially equates to defining the “how” of the depth component within the impact model. It should, therefore, be informed by both

technical and value data with the intention to ensure an intervention (an activity) can create the desired change for the people affected. This data blending can be achieved relatively easily using a mix method approach.

That said, the implementer should not lose sight of a critical contribution to the design process makes in helping ensure proposed activities create meaningful progress towards overcoming the current-future gap. In this key understanding of the future now concept, an inherent requirement for making meaningful progress to a fundamentally changed future is innovation to progressively overcome the gap. To this end, the design process has been repeatedly cited as one of the best ways to create meaningful innovations, particularly when the process draws in people from multiple disciplines and backgrounds.

Implementers should also be mindful of the temptation to differ to best-practices or off-the-shelf solutions as “innovations”. Notwithstanding the convenience of such an approach, it has been shown to be ineffectual in addressing difficult-to-solve problems and often fails to create the expected value, which is not only wasteful but also impacts trust amongst stakeholders. Such failures are largely seen as the result of this quick-solutions approach constraining a deeper understanding of what will create material value for the people affected, the boxing-in of thinking and meaningful innovation through the use of a pre-determine how, as well as treating the people affected are part of a homogenous collective (for example rural communities, the unemployed, or youth).

With the aforementioned in mind, the implementer is encouraged to actively pursue the use of human-centred design to optimise both individual activities and the general aim of creating continuous progress to a meaningful and material end-point.

#### **6.4.1 How to frame a good step-up activity**

Working from the assumption that the implementer is using a design process, the aim of this work is to seek inputs, get feedback on ideas and make proposals that can be considered as part of a good step-up activity. To help frame these engagements, the following points can be used to guide the work.

- The activity clearly relates to a specific identified trajectory. Sometimes an activity may work across trajectories, but it should always ensure meaningful progress in the linked trajectories.
- The activity should create meaningful progress<sup>5</sup> towards the transformation end-point. At times this progress may be limited, but should always be material to the people affected.
- The implementer should be mindful that material progress is not limited by a lack of innovation around overcoming constraints or barriers associated with the end-point. In other words, the scale of material progress is limited by the lack of fully engaging in the process.
- Progress does not imply addressing all constraints or barriers at once or their complete removal in one step.
- Even the best-designed activity will inherently hold the seeds of its eventual decline due to factors such as relevance or changes in the operating context that make it less functional. Therefore, while working on defining the current activity, the implementer should plan around assumptions of the nature and timing of this decline in order to determine what needs to be done during the current activity to lay the foundations for the next step-up activity. This may include deepening partnerships, starting to address particular constraints or laying a critical foundation the next step-up activity may require to offer a seamless transition from one activity to another.

#### 6.4.2 Implementing linked activities as part of an initiative

There may be occasions when the implementer may find it necessary to implement multiple activities in parallel or sequentially as part of a goal-based initiative. For example, as part of a partnership agreement or specific funding cycle. This in itself does not present a challenge to the strategy provided the activities can remain framed within trajectory and represent meaningful progress. As such the goal would define the level of meaningful

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<sup>5</sup> Meaningful progress is a measured positive change in the lived experience of the people affected, which is also relevant to.

progress desired within a given timeframe. From a design perspective, the person affected should form part of this goal-setting to ensure meaningful progress can be reasonably defined.

## 6.5 The role of project and performance management

When applying project management within a Step-up Strategy it should not be based on “command and control” type practices, as seen in first and second-generation project management. Instead, implementers should focus on using practices that follow a “learn and adapt” approach, which focuses more on applying systems thinking and creating value. In Table 2 below, these differences are compared in more detail.

Table 2. Comparing traditional control and adaptive methodologies

traditional control project management methodologies	practical adaptive project management methodologies
<b>Inflexibility:</b> due to planning in the finest detail, high investment in an elaborate plan	<b>Flexibility:</b> by acknowledging that most project environments are dynamic, therefore allowing plans to be more malleable.
<b>Unresponsiveness:</b> due to a static model of the project, if it falls outside the plan it is ignored	<b>Results, not task-orientated:</b> focusing on complying with what the client wants.
<b>Customer dissatisfaction:</b> due to an unrealistic desire to comply with the plan and meet goals, fixes could come later at the expense of the client	<b>More participation:</b> there is a democratisation of the planning process, people who are impacted are involved.
<b>Task not result-orientated:</b> elaborate plans emphasise scheduling and completing tasks leading to a culture of doling out the right work rather than to work right.	<b>Greater accountability:</b> participants are responsible for delivering a complete unit of work, not just in-part tasks.
<b>Lack of innovation:</b> inflexibility and unresponsiveness results in an environment that discourages innovation. There is no room to experiment outside the plan.	<b>Less documentation:</b> only capture relevant information useful to achieving the project deliverable.
<b>Excessive documentation:</b> there is an emphasis on detailed plans and accompanying policies and procedures.	<b>Results over tools:</b> focusing on obtaining results efficiently and effectively, and not elaborate tools that required extensive resources.
<b>High overhead:</b> due to all the documents and controls that must be developed and maintained there is a need for a large number of staff.	<b>Right-measurement:</b> collecting the most appropriate data and turning it into useful information.
<b>Over-control:</b> control at the finest level detail is pursued to assess the slightest deviations from the plan, necessitating the creation of a significant administrative structure.	<b>Divergent thinking:</b> concentrating on the larger picture, focusing on how functions and processes work together to deliver the product.

traditional control project management methodologies	practical adaptive project management methodologies
<b>Over-structuring:</b> through the use of schedules and work breakdowns as a result of focusing on the excessive detail in planning.	<b>Continuous improvement:</b> teams are encouraged to change plans to iteratively improve the process and outcomes.
<b>Over-measurement:</b> becomes the norm in a desire to control the project in the finest detail, which in turn elevates the data of what can be measured over information.	<b>Integrated teams:</b> use of multiple disciplines, collaborating around the project
<b>Emphasis on tools not results:</b> is driven around the desire to automate planning, using the tool becomes more important than managing the project. Resources get poured into using the tool rather than performing the work.	<b>Awareness of irrational processes:</b> acknowledging that processes seldom follow a linear path, teams need to have skills to manage disorder and uncertainty, accepting that elements of a project do not need to neatly fit to be effective.
<b>More is better:</b> resulting in a heavy focus on providing a lot of everything rather than what was relevant.	
<b>Convergent thinking:</b> the focus becomes about schedules and budgets at the expense of a broader perspective.	

Adapted from Kliem, Ludin & Robison (1997)

As can be noted from Table 2, the use of adaptive project management methods is better aligned to the core principles of the Step-up Strategy.

## 7. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To fully realise the Step-Up Strategy implementers should be well-versed in Systems and Design Thinking. With this in mind, the following resources can assist implementers in developing their core competencies in these areas.

### IMPACT PARTNERS SOUTH AFRICA RESOURCES

IPSA Management Competency Framework, Designing people centred solutions

IPSA Online, Designing People Centred Solutions online course

IPSA Reference Guide, Planning and Assessing Initiatives Using a Social Return on Investment Method

## DESIGN RESOURCES

**IDEO.ORG, Design Kit**

<https://www.designkit.org>

**Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University, Tools for taking action**

<https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources>

## SYSTEMS RESOURCES

**Idealized Design: How to solve tomorrow's crisis...today** (Wharton School Publishing)

Russell L. Ackoff, Jason Magidson and Herbert J. Addison

**Redesigning Society** (Stanford University Press)

Russell L. Ackoff and Sheldon Rovin

**Wharton University, Idealized Design: How Bell Labs Imagined and Created the Telephone System of the Future**

<https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/idealized-design-how-bell-labs-imagined-and-created-the-telephone-system-of-the-future/>

**Ackoff Collaboratory Centre for the advancement of Systems Approaches**

<https://ackoffcenter.blogs.com>