



Three Essential Components Sustainable Community Development

To be sustainable, development programs should work to increase the fundamental rights of underserved communities to access resources while building enduring institutions for their protection and management.

In this introductory guide, we will explore three key concepts related to creating and implementing sustainable community development projects:



The bottom-up approach



Appropriate technologies



Cultural sensitivity

According to the International Association for Community Development (IACD), the growing field of community development can be broadly defined as “a practice-based profession and an academic discipline concerned with the organization, education, and empowerment of people within their communities.”

At its core, community development is predominantly concerned with helping communities overcome difficult challenges, such as poverty, food insecurity, deficient infrastructure, lack of education, lack of quality healthcare, and other public health concerns. As human populations expand and natural resources continue to diminish, this field grows more challenging, complex, and important.

There are numerous ways to approach the planning and application of community development efforts. However, integrating sustainable strategies can have significant implications on both the initial outcomes and long-term successes of these efforts.



Without ongoing community participation, sustainable community development is virtually impossible to achieve.



Start at the roots: A bottom-up approach to community development

Rather than taking a top-down approach, which typically involves coordinating with regional government first, bottom-up approaches work to build trust and solidarity with communities, allowing them to help define beneficial development on their own terms. This process – which includes group discussions, consensus-building, and the formation of lasting partnerships – makes it easier to develop more enduring linkages to the resources needed to realize the community’s vision for the future.

Participation is the primary framework for effective, sustainable development. Without community buy-in and ongoing participation, development projects are less likely to achieve long-term positive outcomes. Although building trust with community members takes time, it’s a crucial step that should not be overlooked and should be considered when planning for any project.

When utilizing a grassroots, bottom-up approach, development organizations should tap into the traditional/regional knowledge and abilities of local people.

The Three-Step Approach to Bottom-Up Development

1. Guide community members in the direction of creating a vision for the future. This vision should be driven by the aspirations and insights of residents. Work to find consensus through collaborative discussion.
2. Identify fundamental and systemic problems that may prevent that vision from coming to fruition. Use input from community members to pinpoint key problems and prioritize the most pressing roadblocks.
3. Collaboratively plan and implement sustainable solutions to those problems so that community members are the ones overcoming challenges with the help of organization staff and volunteers.

By guiding people through a grassroots development process and giving them agency over problem solving, communities are more likely to take ownership of the process and continue moving forward.



Finding the Right Fit: Utilizing Appropriate Technologies

After a development organization has raised funding for a project, the next step is often to coordinate the most effective ways to provide support to a community – i.e. create a strategic plan. This plan may include a range of resources in the form of financial aid, medical aid, housing construction, clothing and shoes, hygienic supplies, educational outreach, or the installation/upgrading of physical infrastructure.

Again, the first step is to involve the community and reach consensus on a vision for the future. The next step is to create a step-by-step strategy on how to address challenges and achieve that vision. Community input is critical when creating a project plan because every community has a unique set of strengths, resources, needs, and limitations.

Let's look at a hypothetical example of supplying agricultural aid:

An isolated mountain village in Peru has been struggling to provide enough food for the community and has reached out to a development organization for assistance. After a townhall discussion with residents, it appears that local farmers have been struggling to propagate and harvest crops efficiently due to a lack of agricultural resources and physical labor.

At this point, a project manager from the United States or Europe might consider working with an equipment manufacturing company to provide tractors, trucks, and other large equipment. But this could be a poor use of resources.

In some of the world's more remote locations, local communities often rely heavily on equids (horses, mules, and donkeys) for both agricultural work and transportation. In some of these regions, modern equipment is not only impractical but also difficult or impossible to maintain.

In the Andean region of Peru, a strong young mule might be much more valuable than a truck because automotive parts and even gasoline can be prohibitively expensive and difficult to procure. Rather than providing a tractor or other vehicle, a community development manager might instead provide additional equids, veterinary care, supplies, and training on how to better maintain the health and longevity of working animals.

This is just one example of utilizing appropriate technologies to provide lasting, sustainable solutions that can positively impact quality of life.



Photo: Angela Varnum

"In the field of sustainable development, where renewable resources and climate-smart technologies are buzzing, it may be worth turning an ear toward working equids," Angela Varnum explains in a [2018 article published by Village Earth](#). "These herbivorous livestock generate natural fertilizer, are a source of renewable energy, and can work in conditions which may not be accessible to motorized vehicles, such as steep terrain. It has been estimated that 400 million working animals may save as many as 20 million tons of petroleum per year through their contributions to agricultural production. As 85% of farmers in developing countries work on less than two hectares of land, it is fortunate that working equids can graze marginally-productive agricultural land and be simultaneously used for hauling tourists or rented out to other families."



“Strategic planning is worthless - unless there is first a strategic vision.” – John Naisbitt



Striking a Balance: Educational Outreach and Cultural Sensitivity

Another form of sustainable community development often comes in the form of educational outreach. Unlike physical supplies or even ongoing financial aid, education and training can potentially have a greater long-term impact on a community that is lacking the right educational resources. In some cases, though, the subject matter of an educational campaign may be sensitive, controversial, or even inflammatory within a particular region or community.

Education regarding women’s reproductive health, for example, is considered relatively mainstream in many North American and European communities. In some rural areas of Nepal, however, menstruation and feminine hygiene are considered inappropriate topics to the extent that some young women never receive proper guidance on how to conduct basic self-care, sometimes resulting in severe infections and illness.



Sadly, the subject is so taboo in some households, that menstruating women may even be forbidden from touching anything or cleaning themselves inside the home.

To address the need for education and advocacy regarding safe feminine hygiene in rural areas, the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) Nepal has begun to provide awareness-raising programs among school students. One of the first programs of this kind in Nepal, supported by ICA Japan, was conducted in the Dolagiri School of Changunarayan.

During the program, students were provided with case stories and presented with basic self-care information. Facilitators also explained that menstruation is a natural process and not something to cause shame. Of course, this training had to be approached carefully and in a way that would minimize the likelihood of offending village authority figures, all while still providing much needed information.

“Tolerance, intercultural dialogue, and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world where peoples are becoming more and more closely interconnected.”

—Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations

As you can imagine, outreach programs like this must be approached with a level of consideration regarding local customs and cultural differences in order to ensure that the community remains open to future educational outreach. In some cases, it may even take years to develop enough trust and diplomacy with community leaders before a program like this can be implemented, reinforcing the idea that long-term, sustainable community development is a challenging and ongoing process, but one that can have a tremendous impact on quality of life.



The Village Earth Model

There is no universally accepted methodology for sustainable community development, but there are models and strategies that can increase an organization's chances of achieving sustained success.

The Village Earth development model is designed to reconnect communities to resources that promote human wellbeing by focusing on community self-reliance and self-determination, and on social and political empowerment.



By bolstering development organizations through collaboration, training, research, advocacy, and fiscal sponsorship, Village Earth and other supporting organizations have the ability to enhance the overall success of community development projects across the globe. However, this requires ongoing partnerships and cooperation between governments, non-government entities, and communities.

If you would like to learn more, consider enrolling in the [Sustainable Community Development Certificate](#) program, created by Village Earth and delivered entirely online by Colorado State University. Learn online through case studies, exercises, and group discussions, and share experiences with fellow community development practitioners from around the globe. Also, be sure to visit the [Village Earth blog](#) for sustainable community development news, stories, and information.

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