
1 Building Support

Fundamental to community development are community enhancement and capacity building. Both are processes that involve learning and inclusion and, in most instances, the process is as meaningful as the results. To begin with, all communities have a history that it is important to understand and honour. For many of us, our excitement and enthusiasm for community development can make us impulsive. We want to rush into action and see results. It is, however, better to take stock of what has been done, acknowledge and recognize the contributions of others, build on previous community success, and involve a wide range of members and interests.

The first step is to create awareness, understanding and support for the community development process. To build support for community development in your community, you should know the answers to the following questions:

- Why do you believe a community development approach should be initiated?
- What are the benefits that will result from this approach?
- What first steps need to be taken?
- Who are the key people and/or organizations that should be taking a leadership role?
- What are the longer-term implications of the initiative?

You may think that finding answers to the above questions will be time-consuming and difficult but, as the example on the next page illustrates, this is not the case.

Commitment to any long-term process or action should not be made without understanding what is to be done, why it is being done, the anticipated benefits and who will be involved. Community development is a broad concept, so people may have difficulty knowing where to start and what is expected of them. This is why identifying the first steps in the process is very important. When interest is created, you want an immediate way to turn this interest into further exploration and commitment. Building support for a community development initiative is an on-going task.

One Community's Response

The following is an example of how one community answered the questions that need to be considered in order to build support.

Why do you believe a community development approach should be initiated?

- Our community is facing many challenges with respect to economic development, social issues such as youth crime and the need to upgrade community infrastructure. We do not want someone else's solutions or answers. We have the ability within our community to develop and implement long-term responses.

What benefits will result from this approach?

- community-based economic development activities
- an ability to tap into the skills and abilities of community members
- improved quality of life within the community
- community responsibility rather than waiting for someone else to do it
- the opportunity to address challenges in a planned and holistic way

What are the first steps that need to be taken?

- make informal contact with key organizations and leaders in the community to determine their interest
- hold a public forum to talk about community issues and community development
- determine the readiness of the community for a community development process
- work at creating the needed conditions for a successful community development approach
- create a leadership team (made up of a cross-section of community interests) to start the process

Who are the key people/organizations that should be taking a leadership role?

- Chamber of Commerce
- municipal staff (responsible for community infrastructure)
- school principals
- local economic development authority
- youth agencies
- young people from the community
- community members with a desire to be involved
- church leaders

What are the longer-term issues you will need to consider?

- building support, interest and involvement over time
- development of a community plan
- community capacity (knowledge, skills and abilities of community members)
- money to fund and maintain action
- long-term commitment to sustaining what is started
- eventual need for an organizational structure
(new or existing organization could take on this responsibility as part of its mandate)

Who Should Be Involved?

Community development is an inclusive process. Community members with a shared vision and a sense of belonging to their community usually initiate the community development process. It is important, however, that the process be expanded to include the wide range of interests (i.e. economic, social, environmental) and organizations (i.e. government, labour, business, social services) that are part of the community. Don't make assumptions about traditional roles and responsibilities or levels of interests. For example, many private sector businesses have become increasingly interested in social development issues and some government agencies are now entering into partnerships with community organizations to provide effective programs and services covering a wide range of interests.

The individual make-up of a community influences who needs to be involved and what activities will be viewed as legitimate. Ensuring that different cultures and interests are respected and involved (in a meaningful way) is important. For example, respecting cultural traditions and religious holidays, being aware of different styles of communication and ensuring that persons with disabilities can participate fully are all ways that you can build credibility and support.

Who's Involved In The Process?



The following are a few common mistakes made when a wide cross-section of interests are present:

- misunderstanding silence or the tone of voice in both presentations and responses;
- presenting ideas instead of asking for input;
- assuming needs instead of investigating and/or clarifying them;
- treating interactions as competitions instead of learning opportunities;
- developing frameworks that do not include appropriate examples or thinking patterns;
- judging or stereotyping people by their gender, appearance or past; and
- giving more credence and attention to officially recognized leaders.

As well as the diversity that community members themselves bring to the table, political interests, organizational mandates and existing structures are factors that must be recognized and built into the community development process. If you are not sure how to include these interests in your community development activity, ask them how they would like to become involved.

Seeing Beyond the Surface — Valuing Diversity

A community-owned loan fund was approached by two street bottle pickers for a loan to formalize their activities. Although other financial institutions might have refused them, due to their appearance and lack of permanent addresses, this loan fund supported them. They recognized the assets or equity the two men brought in their knowledge of the market, the geography and their skills. By lending them a small amount of money, they were able to establish a more sophisticated approach to their business and help others do the same. Four years later, a cooperative exists that generates enough revenue for the now seven people involved to live on. The loan was repaid in full and on time.

Lessons from Experience

- Roles and relationships are not always clear-cut at the beginning of the process but, as you develop a plan, these roles and relationships will become clearer.
- Use your network to identify the interests, individuals and organizations that need to be part of the community development process.
- Don't let the past govern the future. Acknowledge where differences and difficulties have existed in the past but focus on common ground and the future of your community.

Points to Ponder

- Is there respect, cooperation and a history of collaboration between the different interests and organizations within your community?
- If not, how might the results of past history be overcome?
- Is there a desire among the various interests and organization within your community to work together for the benefit of the community?

Creating a Valued Local Process

To create a unique and valued community development process draw upon your understanding of your community. This will allow you to develop a process that will respond to your own circumstances. You cannot simply take a process that worked well in another place and apply it to your own community. You should take the knowledge, experience and advice of others and make it your own by adjusting and changing it to meet the specific needs of your community at this particular time.

Designing a local community development process involves:

- understanding your community;
- learning from other community development success stories;
- learning from past efforts that have not worked well;
- recognizing the efforts, knowledge, skills and abilities of all involved; and
- being responsive and flexible so that the process can evolve.

As a community development approach will work only if community members see it as a legitimate process within existing activities and priorities, the approach must:

- be valued by the community,
- involve community members,
- have credible leadership, and
- produce results that suit the community.

When building community support, identify individuals and organizations that are both supportive and non-supportive. The following are some suggestions about how you might do that.

Approach those organizations/individuals where you believe you will find support. You might want to begin a conversation about their interest in the community development initiative and build on it. Invite interested people to take a leadership role and to become active in the creation of the community development plan.

As a second step, approach organizations that may not seem to be very interested or supportive. Remember that community development brings change, shifts power and results in new relationships. Some people may not be receptive to the concept of community development or may feel threatened by it, so try to anticipate why they might resist or not be supportive. Maybe you could provide information or an explanation that will respond to their concerns. Community development is an open process. Keep those who are not interested well-informed and continue to invite them to participate in the process. Look for shared interests rather than factors that cause division or discord.

Building support provides the foundation for the community development process. You are creating a core of interest and base of commitment within your community that will continue to grow. It takes time, particularly if the community has no experience with this type of collective or participatory community development.

Community development is a living process. Many communities start out strong but fail to sustain the participatory nature of the process. To maintain interest and support over time, inclusion and local participation should be built into the very nature of the process and must be maintained throughout.

This can be done by:

- thinking through and planning the process in advance;
- evaluating the process as it is implemented and making adaptations as needed;
- communicating clearly;
- challenging yourself to be successful by focusing on common ground;
- developing an informal network by talking to people about the community development plan and the benefits it will produce;
- holding town hall meetings at regular intervals to keep the community informed and to create an opportunity for conversation;
- asking individuals or organizations known to be strong supporters of community development to spread the word and promote your initiative;

Valued Support

A group of community members in a downtown urban center asked why women who want to leave the life of prostitution often fail. They decided to consult women who had successfully made the transition. They asked what was needed and invited input into designing an initiative that would really work. Many were very skeptical about who would listen to or fund such an initiative. Most people wanted the prostitutes out of the neighbourhood but didn't have much interest in helping to create other options. The new initiative was presented by a respected person whose support was greatly appreciated. It was presented in a way that was understood and realistic because it was based on experience with what works and what doesn't. It was also validated and highly valued by those who were going to use it. Today a transition program developed by these women is operating successfully in the neighbourhood that wanted to just make the problem disappear. It has active community support and acceptance.

- identifying individuals or organizations that may not be strong supporters of community development — listen to their concerns and invite them to participate;
- assigning concrete tasks and roles that individuals and organizations can pursue or become involved with; and
- recognizing the contributions of individuals and organizations and celebrating success.

Developing Buy-In

Community development initiatives can fail because of a lack of support or buy-in from community members and organizations. When a participatory process is sincerely desired, and individuals and organizations believe they are being listened to and included, you will have gone a long way to building community ownership, support and legitimacy. Although there is no doubt that developing this support or buy-in can be time-intensive and involve hard work, developing and maintaining community interest and involvement is an integral part of the process.

Common mistakes that can be made are:

- the failure to take the up-front time needed to develop support for community development;
- imposing a vision on community members;
- failing to involve all the interests and sectors of the community in the visioning process;
- designing processes that are not inclusive or open and that fail to build momentum;
- starting out strong but then failing to inform and involve community members and organizations in an on-going and meaningful manner;
- leaders who take control and fail to build community ownership; and
- volunteers and/or paid staff taking an active role and seeing the action or initiative as belonging to them rather than to the community.

Ten Keys to Getting "Buy In"

- 1 Effective communication and appreciation*
- 2 Common vision and goals*
- 3 A comprehensive, clear plan*
- 4 Appropriate leadership*
- 5 Community and political support*
- 6 Adequate information and resources*
- 7 Professional advice and technical assistance*
- 8 Flexibility and the ability to compromise*
- 9 Participation from many different groups*
- 10 Willingness to work with change and diversity*

- It takes time to build commitment and support. Do not get discouraged if results are not immediate. Start where interest exists, and build upon this foundation.

- Understand the community development history of your community. Consider what has worked well in the past and what has not.

Points to Ponder

Lessons from Experience

- Take time to build an understanding of and appreciation for community development.
- Identify the next steps. Think through how you can turn interest into commitment.
- Who are the individuals or organizations that you think may not be supportive of community development? How will you respond to their concerns?

- Can you explain why you want to pursue a community development approach in your community and the benefits that will result from such actions?

- Is there a core group in place to provide on-going leadership?

- Can you identify supportive individuals and organizations in your community?