Anatomy of Sustainable Community Development

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Community does not fit into a nice neat package. Strategies the environment can sustain and that citizens want and can afford will generally vary from community to community. A community is not a static place within a static landscape, but rather a lively, self-reinforcing resonance of ever-changing, interactive, interdependent systems of relationships. More importantly, a community is not just the people who are currently in it. For purposes of community development it is important to learn exactly what a particular community of focus is all about – as well as what it is they are trying to develop?

Flourishing communities are the foundation of a healthy society. In local communities all of our nation's complex issues present themselves—housing, jobs, business development, crime, public participation, personal and community values, and the natural environment, etc. But how does one choose which efforts at change and/or improvement related to problems in any of these areas will reap the richest and most long-lasting rewards for interested stakeholders? This is where the practitioner, student, or community leader enters the picture. To be effective they must possess an overall understanding of the multiple paths toward sustainable development, including tools and methodologies that can be used to achieve true community with a prosperous economy in the larger context of a healthy environment. But practitioners wanting to solve problems more immediately believe that “the big picture view” of sustainability is not specific enough for the problems facing the community on a daily basis. This view completely misses the point that sustainable community development is more holistic and inclusive, intended to address the integration of environmental, social, and economic dimensions in planning and action.

For progress to happen community groups, governments, and industries have to begin to make more use of experienced sustainability professionals that have been trained in systemic approaches to local and global problems at every stage in the design and implementation of community development projects and programs. These practitioners are able to dispense with the traditional linear approach to problem-solving and address problems and key concerns from a multi-dimensional perspective. To encourage participation and to assist in identifying specific goals and defining action strategies in community improvement, including describing transitional steps toward sustainability, practitioners are beginning to rely upon the participatory advantages offered by public engagement strategies and community-engaged planning processes.

In addition, by applying critical thinking to consultation the practitioner naturally shows more willingness to integrate new or revised perspectives based on a community group’s ways of thinking and acting. This leaves the door open for creative action that leap frogs the often unsuccessful traditional approaches to development and provides the opportunity for increased community buy-in to the decisions made.
Practitioners must also embrace synthetic thinking which stresses the importance of a systems approach to multi-sector elements of sustainability and fits nicely within the context of critical thinking by stressing integration of different sectoral characteristics to aid the critical and creative processes. Synthetic thinking promotes the ability to recognize relationships among environmental, social, and economic problems and advances the ability to integrate these different sectoral issues in problem-solving. Synthetic thinking will also help in applying knowledge to dealing with new and different problems, by being able to think outside the box.

The bottom line is that communities themselves are responsible for choosing what is important to protect and maintain within their own time scales, not inhibited by a definition of sustainability established elsewhere. A community living sustainably maintains the important mix of core value options and opportunities without creating unnecessary limitations (Flint, 2006). Such conscious living guarantees, as much as humanly possible, that a community’s decisions and actions, often assisted by a practitioner, will prevent resources from falling below the threshold required, perpetuating them through time and thus not compromising the quality of life for future generations (Gibson, 2006).

The Sustainable Community Development (SCD) planning process is supported by the 3 Cs of sustainability. It is extremely important to understand the many, diverse Connections in capital assets and human-nature interactions associated with action planning so Choices made do not produce unintended Consequences. This is the number one principle of any planning process and is what makes the planning “strategic.” Thus, we must be continually aware of basic factors affecting how human and natural worlds operate. That is exactly what integrates the idea of sustainability into strategic action planning.

Conventional planning routinely performed by the town/city planner involves decisions and executions carried out by the community legislators and/or the different governmental agencies – usually in isolation. On occasion the design team presents plans to the community and input is gathered through various methods such as surveys and public hearings. But in many instances, comprehensive planning has lacked significant public dialogue, or encouragement of small discussion group input on the part of the responsible jurisdiction. In a conventional planning exercise strategic integration of issues is rarely considered. A system’s approach to planning is also rare. Usually major issues are isolated into topics with little cross-feed and there is limited public input and transparency.

Strategic planning for SCD has emerged as a compelling alternative to conventional approaches to planning for community development: a participatory, holistic and inclusive planning process that leads to positive, concrete changes in communities. Strategic planning actions in SCD are best developed by taking a system’s approach to understanding, forecasting, and decision-making. Only through the use of a sustainability framework (e.g., the Natural Step, 3-overlapping circles model, Triple Bottom Line) applied consistently throughout the SCD project, as a sustainability lens in deciding on plan objectives and strategic actions, can a community be assured that it is incorporating concepts of sustainability during its process for systemic strategic planning (Pfau, 2011).
There are two elements that community members must understand about their community before they commence on an SCD process: the human assets that a community possesses and the needs or problems that a community has. The SCD process itself includes the

- convening of stakeholders,
- creating a vision of the community identified by core values,
- establishing goals,
- employing the emerging field of sustainability science to identify assets and challenges and set targets for community improvement,
- developing objectives and actions to improve sustainability performance with assistance from a selected sustainability framework for guidance,
- developing a business case for pursuing sustainability,
- identifying and selecting improvement projects that meet the chosen sustainability framework criteria for assessing a project,
- designing a strategy for assessing community change and indicators to monitor change (again based on sustainability science),
- employing an adaptive management approach to implement change which engages in learning by experience, thus refining/revising strategic actions to achieve the intended outcome defined by the vision, and
- communicating to community members for encouraging participation in the overall effort.

SCD efforts begin by developing an understanding of what exists in the community right now — the capabilities of local residents, associations, and institutions. Whereas traditional development processes might begin with an assessment of what is lacking in a community— in other words the community’s problems — asset mapping flips this around to identify and capitalize on the tangible and intangible strengths that already exist.

Likewise, a necessity for SCD success is getting a large number of the population from the target community (critical mass) to engage and participate in community improvement planning and action implementation. Public support is crucial, because it lends credibility to a project initiative, helps you gain further support, provides strength for action or political pressure, blocks passive sabotage, and creates community ownership of and responsibility for dealing with the issues of concern. Efforts must be focused upon how best to engage people and use their knowledge most effectively to develop action strategies specifically directed toward community resilience and sustainability. These action strategies should be founded upon plans initiated, driven, and completed by the target community. Communities that have the ways and means to undertake these challenges demonstrate “capacity.” A fundamental goal of community capacity building is to increase the ability of individuals to make policy choices and select modes of implementation among development options, based on an understanding of environment potentials and limits and of perceived needs.

After asset assessment the next step in SCD is to review main strengths and problems that were compiled from the different survey tools that might be employed in the community. These should be analyzed in the sustainability framework context while trying to achieve agreement on the ranking of key problems listed. It is extremely important and obvious that the community fully delineate the needs in the community before developing the action plan of visioning, etc.
One of the unfortunate by-products of initiating a needs assessment or problem identification process is the implication that the community has many shortcomings. In interactions among community members therefore, it is best to try and keep the dialogue positive.

In developing the Strategic Sustainability Plan it is critical to establish a vision, goals, and objectives, so the community can be sure it’s pursuing the right strategies. Having a listing of community needs will assist the work of problem identification and visioning in the action plan for strategic sustainability planning. In visioning the community must examine its members’ core values and determine how those core values are projected into the future (Norton, 2005). A positive, meaningful vision of the future supported by compelling goals provides purpose and direction in the present. A vision is like a lighthouse which illuminates rather than limits, gives direction rather than destination. A community’s vision communicates what members or stakeholders believe are the ideal conditions for the community – how things would look if the issue important to each community member were perfectly addressed. By developing a vision statement, the participating community members make the beliefs and governing principles of the group clear to the greater community.

In the community SCD planning process it is extremely important to see a goal as the first step in making dreams a reality, a statement of intention regarding the actions to achieve a certain vision. Setting goals moves the community ever closer to realizing its vision. A goal is a concrete thing in which you set into motion the steps to obtain it. A goal is a target you want to reach or achieve, a general statement in abstract terms of an intended outcome. Goals should be focused on the community’s strengths and reflect the end state the community wants to arrive at in the form of increased capital after the Strategic Sustainability Plan has been implemented.

To continue work on SCD the community must build on their shared vision and goals with the development of objectives, the foundation for guiding strategic actions. Objectives are specific measurable elements of an issue or problem – how much of what will be accomplished and by when – that are the means for achieving any particular community goal. The way to meet the community’s defined goals will be through the setting of objectives. And each objective is related to a problem that has been characterized through community dialogue. The community must design a process for identifying and understanding the variables at work in a particular problem system and the influence they exert (Nagy and Heaven, 2009). The vision sets the “big picture” that the goals and objectives fit into. Developing objectives is a critical step in the community’s planning process. Completed objectives can serve as markers to show members of the community and others what the SCD initiative has accomplished (Nagy and Fawcett, 2011).

Once the community stakeholders have agreed to a vision, goals, and objectives and have evaluated the objectives for sustainability, they are ready for the next step: developing the strategies that will make the objectives possible. Strategic action can commence once your objectives are satisfactory to all members of the community wanting to have a say, as well as important people outside the community with knowledge of the issues. While the strategic plan might address general goals stakeholders want to see accomplished, the strategy statements themselves will help determine the specific actions they will take to make their vision a reality, always considering both the subtle and big picture constraints of the 3 Cs of sustainability.
Strategic planning will lead to a set of decisions about what the community wants to do, why they want to do it, and how they will do it. The overall goal of strategic planning is to increase a community’s ability to work together to affect their vision, goals, and objectives – while trying to minimize the number of “unintended consequences” that might result. A strategic plan will describe the way a community will use its initiatives to meet its objectives while being well-informed of the many human-nature interconnections involved. Naturally, some decisions and actions are more important than others. Much of strategic planning lies in making the tough decisions about what is most important to achieving success, always trying your best to understand the vast array of synergistic processes (both internal and external) that will be influencing action choices you ultimately decide upon (Nagy and Axner, 2009). By integrating the steps you are able to see the “big picture” a thoroughly integrated plan that will most definitely provide the most efficient use of time, energy, and resources.

Creating project metrics or monitoring tools is the last step in the successful completion of a community’s Strategic Sustainability Plan. Communities come together to reduce levels of violence, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, to work for safe, affordable housing, or to help improve the water quality in their local ecosystems. But how do they know whether these programs are working? If they are not effective, and even if they are, how can the community make them better? And finally, how can community leaders make intelligent choices about which promising programs are working best in their community over the long-term?

Assessment provides the transition from the intellectual nature of planning to the real world where your plan is being executed. When you measure the actual effects of your actions at regular intervals, you will know whether or not you are making progress toward your goals. The assessment process seeks to find out if your actions are on target and improvement in the community is occurring. And more times than not, the metric of assessment is the indicator. An indicator is something that helps you understand where you are, which way you are going and how far you are from where you want to be. A good indicator alerts you to a problem before it gets too bad and helps you recognize what needs to be done to fix it.

Once the community has chosen criteria that characterize their action projects, they must decide exactly what they are going to measure, and for how long – the indicators that will monitor the criteria. Once indicators and corresponding data bases are agreed to, community members can begin setting benchmarks or targets for each indicator. The criteria/indicator model will require system diagnosis to explain undesirable trends that may be shown by indicator measures. Such diagnosis is a key element in adaptive management processes that can be designed to direct the use of resources within a sustainable framework, to help understand what the system conditions are, and to alert managers when indicators tell the community leaders something is wrong.

The above planning process is referred to as “Communities of Change,” a theory of action which has evolved from my experiences in sustainable community development through the last couple of decades. This process employs representative practices for establishing community wisdom and capacity, and the process of evolutionary sustainability for enhancing community change (Milstein and Chapel, 2011). The outcome of this process is not a report that will sit on a shelf, but rather a strategy document that will guide the setting of policies and procedures to affect change in the target community over both the short- and long-term.