

Understanding Community Development

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*“The real voyage of discovery consists not of seeking new landscapes,
but in having new eyes.” - Marcel Proust*

Rural community development is a process conducted by community members. It is a process where local people can not only create more jobs, income and infrastructure, but also help their community become fundamentally better able to manage change.

The “concrete” benefits of community development, such as employment and infrastructure, come through local people changing attitudes, mobilising existing skills, improving networks, thinking differently about problems, and using community assets in new ways. Community development improves the situation of a community, not just economically, but also as a strong functioning community in itself.

Rural community development builds the five capitals of a community – physical, financial, human, social and environmental. It is through participation in their community that people rethink problems and expand contacts and networks; building social capital. They learn new skills, building human capital. They develop new economic options, building physical and financial capital. They also can improve their environment.

Community plus Development

Community development combines the idea of “community” with “development”. We discussed earlier the concept of community – a group of people with a shared identity. Hence, community development relies on interaction between people and joint action, rather than individual activity – what some sociologists call “collective agency” (Flora and Flora, 1993).

“Development” is a process that increases choices. It means new options, diversification, thinking about apparent issues differently and anticipating change (Christenson et.al., 1989). Development involves change, improvement and vitality – a directed attempt to improve participation, flexibility, equity, attitudes, the function of institutions and the quality of life. It is the creation of wealth – wealth meaning the things people value, not just dollars (Shaffer, 1989). It leads to a net addition to community assets, avoiding the “zero sum” situation where a job created “here”, is a job lost “there”.

Putting the two terms together – community development – means that a community itself engages in a process aimed at improving the social, economic and environmental situation of the community.

The community is both the means and the end of community development. The community itself takes action and participates together. It is through this action that

the community becomes more vital, not just economically but as a strong functioning community in itself.

Community development improves the ability of communities to collectively make better decisions about the use of resources such as infrastructure, labour and knowledge (figure 1).

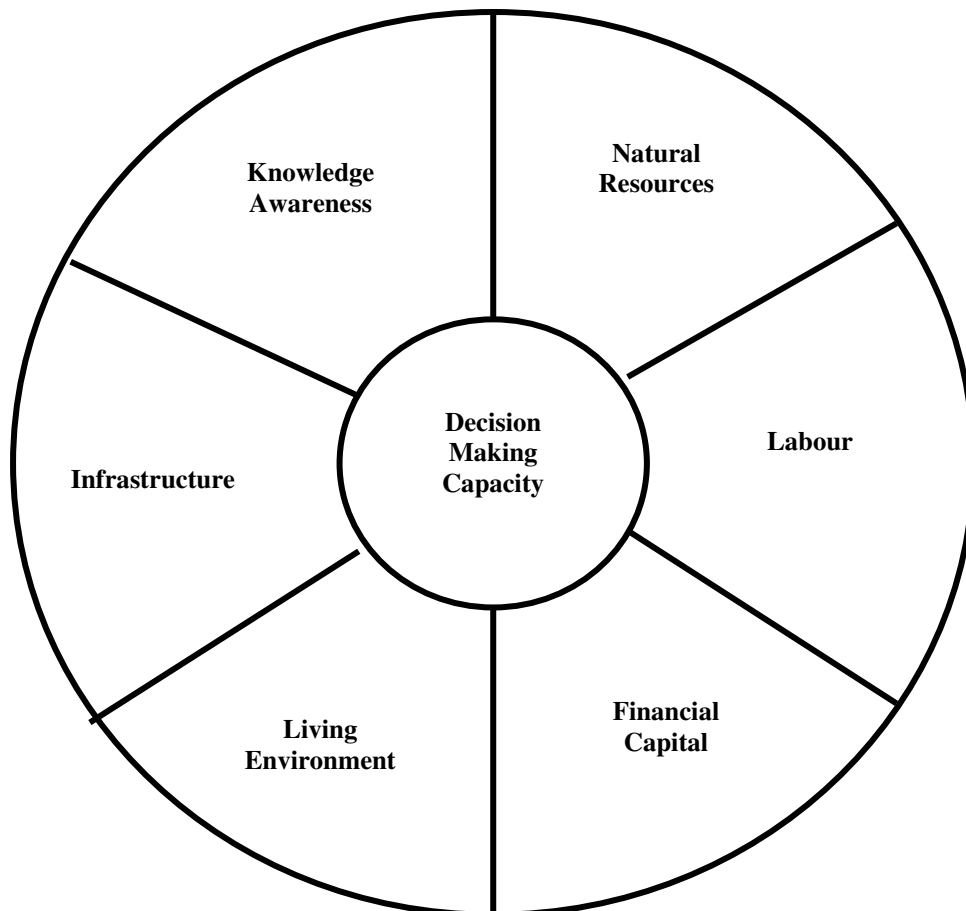


Figure 1. Community development enhances community decisions about the employment of resources (Source: Shaffer, unpublished).

Definitions

The key elements of community development are expressed to varying degrees in many definitions. Some key descriptions are as follows:

- For community development to occur, people in a community must believe working together can make a difference and organise to address their shared needs collectively – Flora et. al. (1992).
- Community development is a group of people in a community reaching a decision to initiate a social action process to change their economic, social, cultural and environmental situation – Christenson et. al. (1989).
- Community development is a process that increases choices. It creates an environment where people can exercise their full potential to lead productive, creative lives. – Ron Shaffer (pers. com.).
- Community development is a process where people are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities and communities are integrated into the life of the nation enabling them to contribute fully to national progress. – (United Nations, from Biggs, 1999)
- Community capacity is the combined influence of a community's commitment, resources and skills that can be deployed to build on community strengths and address community problems and opportunities – (Aspen Institute, 2000).
- Community vitality is the capacity of the local socio-economic system to survive and persist in generating employment, income, and wealth and to maintain if not improve its relative economic position. – Shaffer (1989).
- Community economic development is about identifying and harnessing local community resources and opportunities and stimulating sustainable economic and employment activity – Kenyon (1994).
- Sanders (1958) saw community development as a process moving from stage to stage; a method of working towards a goal; a program of procedures and as a movement sweeping people up in emotion and belief.

Development, not just growth

Regardless of the definition, community development is not just “growth”. Growth means more jobs and more investment but implies “more of the same”. It does not necessarily increase choices, networks or ability to manage change.

Development can also sometimes mean “less”, fewer people in a community, or the loss of a manufacturing plant for example could improve the circumstances of what people value in the community. Development can occur without growth and growth can occur without development.

Clarifying Terms

Community development often is associated with terms such as community capacity building, community vitality, empowerment, rural development or self-reliance. The basic elements of collective action, ownership and improved circumstances are common to all these ideas. There may be slight differences in emphasis. For example, while community capacity building focuses on enhancing the assets and abilities of the community, the term is essentially synonymous with community development.

The debate increases over the distinction between community development and economic development.

Community Development or Economic Development?

Economic development is part of community development. Local industry development involves facilitation of relatively small groups of industry people addressing specific issues, such as discussion groups or market alliances. This is part of economic development.

Economic development involves many of the elements of community development, such as participation, rethinking, action learning etc. However, it specifically aims to improve the relative economic position of the community. Flora et. al. (1992) argues that it does not necessarily lead to improved quality of life nor involve “collective agency”. Economic development largely aims to improve employment, income and the economic base of the community.

Economic development is part of community development, which seeks to build all five community capitals, not only enhancing the community’s economy but its environment, social structures, attitudes and assets (figure 2).

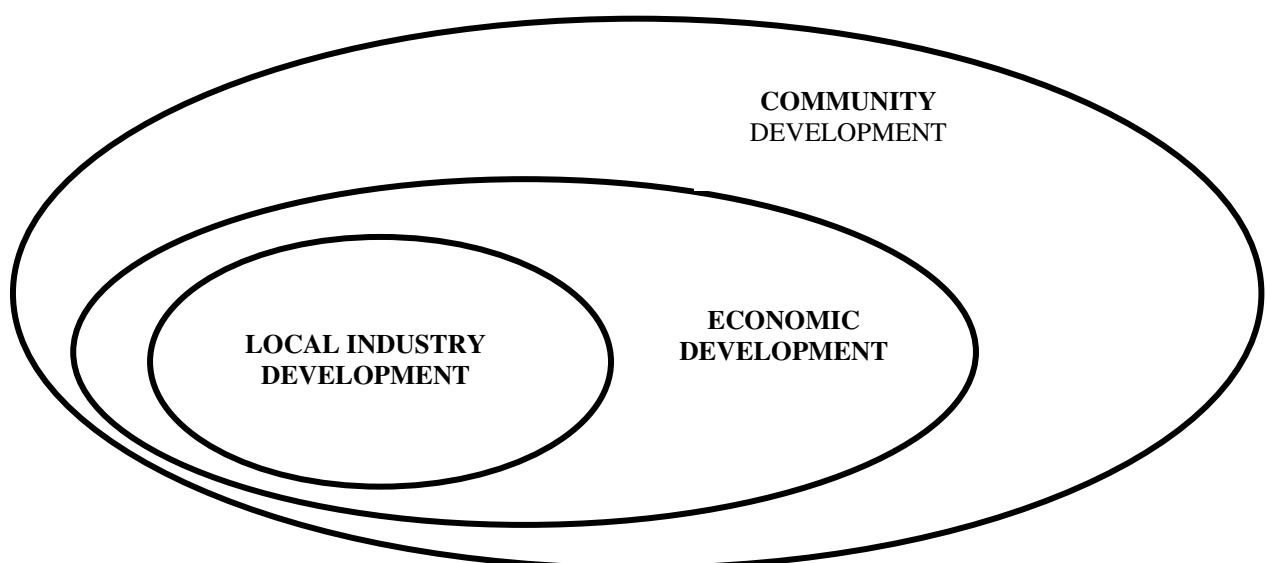


Figure 2. The relationship between industry development, economic development and community development.

Practitioners debate whether community development or economic development comes first. Some argue that communities need jobs and income before broader social and human development can occur. Others maintain that new attitudes and knowledge, together with greater organisation and wider relationships in the community, underpin economic development. Many community development practitioners describe their work as community economic development.

Principles

There is no “recipe” for a process of community development. Rather, a set of key principles guide a flexible process of engagement and action as follows:

- Start where rural people are – the existing concerns and situation of people is the starting point of community development,
- Community development creates a vehicle for people to act on existing concerns,
- The passion and enthusiasm of local people drives action. Belief, motivation and commitment are the “fuel in the tank” of community development.
- Community ownership/involvement – the community makes and implements decisions, and the community’s initiative and leadership is the source of change,
- People build motivation and community capacity through participation and active involvement in decision-making and implementation,
- Inclusiveness – all citizens should be given an equal opportunity to be involved. Effort is required to encourage diverse sectors of the community to participate.
- External facilitators and resource people are “invited in” to work *with* rural people, rather than working *for* them, or delivering services *to* them. They have a responsibility to challenge and suggest, but not make or influence community decision-making,
- Development activities foster leadership, entrepreneurship and altruism,
- The existing capacity of people and their community need to be recognised and appreciated as well as creating opportunities for them to build their capacity,
- A holistic approach is used building economic, human, social and environmental aspects of community as an interrelated whole,
- “Reframing” – community development helps people redefine problems and opportunities and discover new options,
- Changed attitudes and networks are as important as material outcomes,
- A diversity of opinion and perspective is welcomed,

- Success, no matter how small, needs to be recognised and celebrated,
- Activities should be fun and social,
- Not all communities are suited to, or prepared for, development activities.

Rethinking

One crucial principle is “rethinking”. Community development fundamentally relies on creating new options by reconsidering issues and problems with new assumptions. For example, if you think of “export” from the community as the physical transfer of cattle, wheat or other products in return for money, only a few options for building exports appear, such as improved commodity prices.

However, if you think of “export” as activities that *bring money into a community* a new range of alternatives become available such as tourism, education, government, and transport stops as export activities. Development plans can be put in place to bolster these export activities. For example, a unique bakery in Beechworth, Victoria attracts many visitors from outside the community – it is the town’s largest export industry even though no products necessarily leave the town (Municipal Association of Victoria, 1994).

The Stockmans’ Hall of Fame is a major export industry for western Queensland acting as a regional “anchor” from which many towns and businesses draw visitors. Community festivals, government employees, and educational institutions are all export “industries” because they bring money into communities.

Rethinking helps communities redefine assets. For example, in the small rural town of Jasper, Arkansas, USA, local people redefined elderly residents, not as dependents, but as community assets with experience and unique knowledge of local history, music and crafts. They act as hosts for a thriving community-run tourist venture (Newton County Resource Council, unpublished).

Rethinking also debunks local “myths”. Some communities have examined their own economy or swapped with a neighbouring town to examine each other’s economy and assets. The results have forced people to rethink beliefs taken for granted in the past. For example, a common attitude in many country towns is “there are no jobs”. However, some communities have found that employers are looking for workers but can’t find people with appropriate skills, or poor housing discourages workers to stay. The employment issue therefore involves skills and housing, not just lack of jobs.

Rethinking creates new options. For example, many communities despairing at the migration of youth, put effort into activities to retain local young people. However, few communities deliberately attempt to attract young people who had left the community some years before, back to the community as adults with families wishing to settle.

Ingredients

The key elements or ingredients for successful community development are:

- A slight level of dissatisfaction – motivation and enthusiasm based on a feeling that “things could be better”,
- Belief and expectation of self help – a belief in the future of the community and a conviction that realising that future depends on the action of community members,
- Local Leadership – committed formal and informal leaders that can enthuse and support others, foster “shared leadership”, accept criticism, and act as local champions for community development efforts,
- Collaboration – a strong culture of cooperation and participation,
- Willingness to experiment and take advantage of opportunities,
- Cultivate Allies – actively seek, inform, and network with outside supporters,
- Work hard and stay with the process, especially when there is a setback,
- Focus on specific actions without losing sight of the “weird and wonderful”.

(adapted from Shaffer, 1989)

Given these principles and “ingredients”, what would a process of community development look like?

Community Development Process

The key to community development is facilitating a community in applying the principles to guide a flexible series of actions that are appropriate for the situation of the community. There are many “models” and frameworks for community development processes. There is a trade-off between communities having clear future plans for steps in the process and retaining flexibility and versatility. Considerable skill, confidence and judgement is needed to maintain an adaptable community-led process guided by the principles of community development.

While the application of principles in a flexible process is the key, figure 3 describes a sequence of key steps in a community development process. These steps are not prescriptive, but they rather describe the usual stages that most communities go through during a versatile process of community development. Communities may not progress through all the steps and some may occur concurrently.

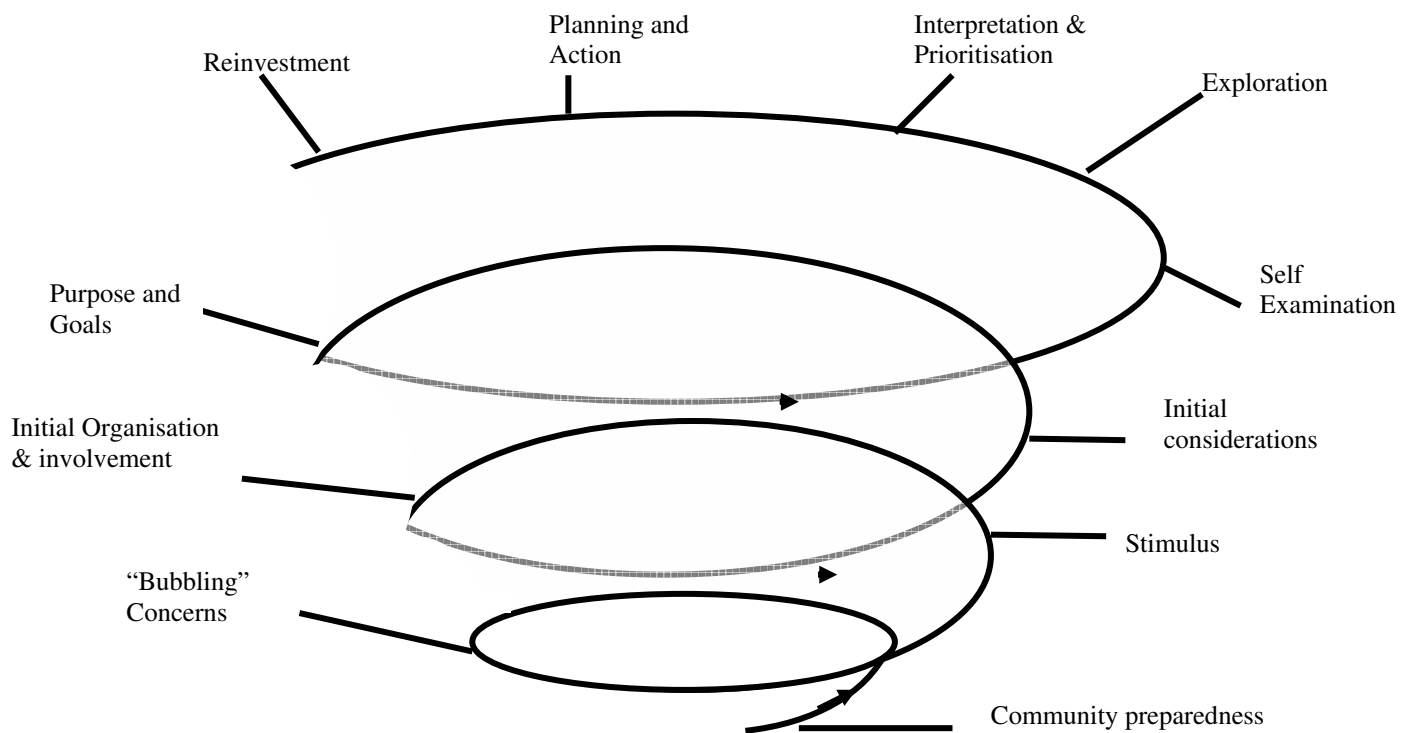


Figure 3. The general stages in a community development process

1. Community Preparedness

Communities need to have some of the key ingredients for a development process – motivation, local leadership, a sense of ownership. Not all communities are interested in, or prepared for, undertaking a process of community development. At any one time, only a few communities may see the need, or have people motivated to organise and lead the community in development activities. Communities may have only a couple of the ingredients for success.

2. “Bubbling” Concerns

Community development processes develop from a situation where issues and concerns are “bubbling” around. People are concerned, enthusiastic, motivated, frustrated. Private “troubles” become public concerns as people share issues that matter to them individually. People may begin to see some advantage for them in community improvement. They also may have altruistic feelings of contributing to the welfare of the whole community.

3. *Stimulus*

Often, a stimulus brings the “bubbling” situation to a head. A local crisis, such as a mine closing or business leaving town sparks community action. A local leader, a local community group or several concerned citizens may galvanise community action. “Outside” input such as a visit by a community facilitator, hearing what another community has done, or a visit by local people to a conference may stimulate action. In “prepared” communities even an impassioned speech may turn concern to action.

4. *Initial Organisation and Involvement*

After a stimulus often the first step is an event that brings the community together – usually at a public meeting or forum. At this point, community representatives may invite a facilitator or resource person into the community to help with suggestions, information and the process itself. Some community members may have a clear idea of what is needed or what they want to do. Others may simply want to do “something” to improve their community but are not sure what.

5. *Engagement and Issues Identification*

After some initial organisation, a key step is activities to engage local people and give as diverse range of citizens the opportunity to be involved. Engagement of people occurs throughout a community development process, but it is crucial to actively foster involvement early in the process.

There are several important aspects of engagement. First, it involves understanding the existing concerns of community members. This means identifying what people have passion for, what they feel community issues are, and how interested they are in being involved. Basic questions here are "What are your concerns?", "How would you like your community to be?", “Would you like to be involved?”

Second, it is important to ask citizens how they would like to participate. In many community efforts local leaders overlook this. They often choose participation opportunities that they are familiar with, often opting for traditional meetings and committees by default. Asking people how they would like to be involved and actively seeking alternative organisational arrangements and events that are fun and social will help people participate. Often this leads to a judgement about how prepared the community is to conduct a development effort, and how people would like to plan the process. It also generates trust, involvement and identifies local “champions”.

Third, some community members may wish to pursue a particular idea they have passion for, such as a new business, streetscape or a shop local campaign. The process needs to allow these people to get started on acting on the idea even though not everyone may agree or it may not seem to be a priority. Passion drives community development and a balance must be struck between supporting passionate people and longer term self examination and prioritisation.

There are many techniques for engagement and issues identification. They include one on one discussion, surveys, focus groups, public meetings, charrettes, community “conversations” and many more. They are outlined in section 7 on Techniques and Skills.

1. Initial Considerations

As a community begins to organise, some questions are crucial for the community to answer:

- Where are we at?
- How do we want our community to be?
- How do we get there?
- Who can help us?

(from Shaffer, 1989; Kenyon, 1994):

These questions provide the framework of a community development process. They are difficult to answer because the responses are largely value statements about what people see as worthwhile or significant in their community. Opinions will vary markedly. Yet answering these questions is the cornerstone of the process.

Another vital question for community members is “what are your concerns?”. People’s concerns drive motivation and action. It is important for people to elect community development activities that address their concerns – to help people take action themselves on what they are motivated about.

2. Purpose and Goals

From initial engagement and considerations, communities need to develop a purpose and goals for a development effort. It’s best if these are achievable and can be clearly defined and articulated. The purpose may be a broad vision statement or a more specific intention to improve a particular aspect of the community. Goals need to be specific, measurable, and achievable and may include achieving other stages in the process.

It is also useful for people to raise their hopes for the process of development itself. For example, that a broad range of people will be involved, that we can really improve employment. People need to also raise any concerns they have for the process. For example, that conflict may be difficult to manage or that people may not wish to be involved.

3. Self Examination

A period of self examination and community analysis helps people to appreciate their community’s situation and existing capacity, to rethink problems and issues, and to identify new options. The purpose is not just data-gathering, but awareness-raising, involvement and “reframing”. Hence, the involvement of the community in self examination is critical. An outside consultant can examine a community and

recommend options. However, the extent of rethinking, ownership and contacts built in the community are usually far less than if the community itself conducts self examination. It can be done using existing “assets” such as a local historical society, high school or TAFE classes, local community groups or interested citizens.

Self examination can take many forms:

- Study of past achievements and projects, or reflection on ways the community has coped with change in the past,
- Listing of community assets and mapping relationships between different aspects of the community such as youth, elderly, community groups or local government.
- Audit or inventory of “capitals” – this may be a simple list or an analysis based on for example on “pressure, state, response” (Commonwealth Government, 1996). This means describing current pressures, such as reduced farm returns or decreased infrastructure. Second, what state has been created by pressures, such as people leaving agriculture. Third, what is occurring to respond to the current state of the community, such as diversification of agriculture or investigation of new industries.
- Community surveys and skills audits,
- Community economic analysis – calculation of several indicators such as population/employment ratios and location quotients, that can identify gaps in the local economy,
- SWOT analysis – listing community strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats,
- Photographs taken by community members of how they want their community to be, and not to be.
- Trends – information gathering on factors affecting the community such as trends in agricultural markets or demographic changes,

Methods of self examination are detailed further in section 7, Techniques and Skills.

4. *Exploration*

A period of exploration often accompanies or follows self examination. This involves gathering new information and ideas. Again there are several ways of exploring issues.

- Environmental scan – a forward looking view of what outside influences are affecting the community, or potentially could influence the community, such as changes to legislation, or economic shifts. This has been used in community “futuresearch” workshops held across Queensland.

- Community swaps – members of similar towns or districts visit each other’s community and compare their impressions and ideas for development. This brings new perspectives, helping local people rethink problems and identify new options,
- What others have done – by building contacts, reading, attending conferences, and visiting other communities, local people can learn from what other communities have done,
- Expert advice and consultancy,
- “Brainstorming” – raising ideas with only clarification. This has been used in community “idea generation” workshops.
- Rethinking and creativity exercises.

5. Interpretation and Prioritisation

Data gathered and ideas developed during the engagement, self examination and exploration phases needs to be “analysed” and debated. This leads to clear priorities for action. This analysis phase may involve looking for patterns and gaps in community data, recognising new ideas, perceiving common issues of interest, and identifying local “champions”.

There are at least two forms of prioritisation. First, “rational” prioritisation involves a relatively reasoned process weighing up pros and cons and importance. For example, people may “vote” or ascribe fictitious “dollars” to a particular issue from a list developed at a public meeting. Often people identify priorities for others, such as “local government should....”.

Second, “prioritisation by motivation” involves people expressing personal motivation and passion for an issue, regardless of its perceived importance by the community at large. It is something they are keen about and want to take action on. People nominate themselves to take action rather than someone else. Both forms of setting priorities are important.

At this point, it’s timely for citizens to consider what they can influence and what they can’t. Communities can easily focus on issues they may little control over, such as government policy, corporate decisions or trade. They should influence these where they can, but not lose sight of the issues they can substantially influence such as business development or the local environment.

Community members need to also ask “of all the things that we *could* do, what are the few things we *can* do.”

Considering the feasibility of ideas and proposals is also important during priority setting. Communities need to ask themselves whether a proposal is:

- politically feasible – is it consistent with state and local government policy? Will it be too risky for local politicians to champion?
- financially feasible – does it make business sense? Will it turn a profit and how quickly? How much risk is involved?
- logistically feasible – does the community have the resources to fulfil the proposal? Are resources and markets close enough? Is there appropriate infrastructure?
- able to be implemented – do community members have the skills, money and time to implement the proposal?

6. *Planning and Action on Priorities*

Plenty of action has occurred so far. Local people have examined their community, explored ideas and options and selected some key issues to work on. Some community members may have been taking action on a particular issue from the very start. Yet, at this point community members will be prepared to create some outcomes on the issues they have prioritised.

This involves the development of a strategy to progress particular issues. Strategies are a plan of action - patterns of actions, decisions and resource allocations to achieve an outcome. This range of action may include networking, feasibility studies, reporting progress, data gathering, raising funds, conducting trials, publicity, working bees, negotiating funding and so on. Strategies often involve a choice between a series of options then action, followed by more options (figure 4).

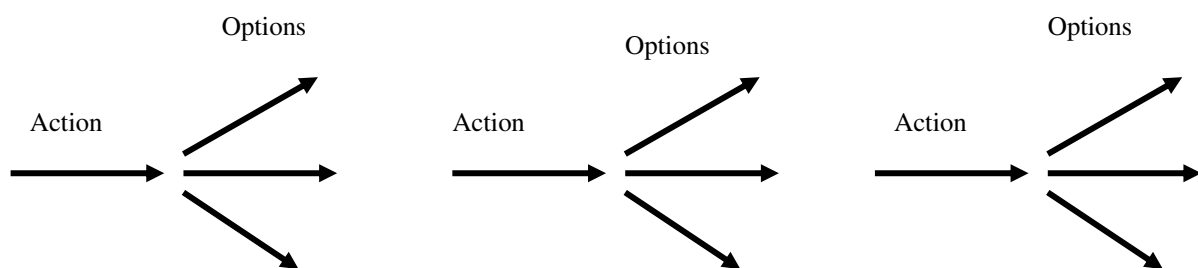


Figure 4. Community strategies involve selecting alternative actions.

Key issues for communities in this planning and action phase are:

- Organisation – communities need to be well organised to follow through on action. Often a steering committee will delegate specific issues to working groups. An existing community group may work on particular issues.

- Maintaining community interest – informal networks, media output, newsletters, and updates for community leaders help people stay informed and motivated.
- Celebrating success – success, no matter how small, needs to be recognised and celebrated. Citizen awards, publicity, appreciation days and community functions allow local people to recognise their achievements and progress towards goals.(adapted from Kenyon, 1994).

7. *Reinvestment*

Community development never ends. Particular development initiatives have a lifecycle of initiation, expansion, maturity and conclusion. However, the close of a particular effort doesn't mean that the job of community vitality is "done". Development, as a process of organisation, rethinking, decision-making and enhancing community capitals is ongoing. Communities need to constantly be seeking to expand their resource base and their ability to manage change. This means ongoing reinvestment of time and effort in the community and the fostering of new leaders and community motivation.

Ultimately, rural community vitality takes the form of a succession of specific initiatives such as business expansion, amenity improvement or training programs, driven by the underlying concern and motivation of community members (figure 5).

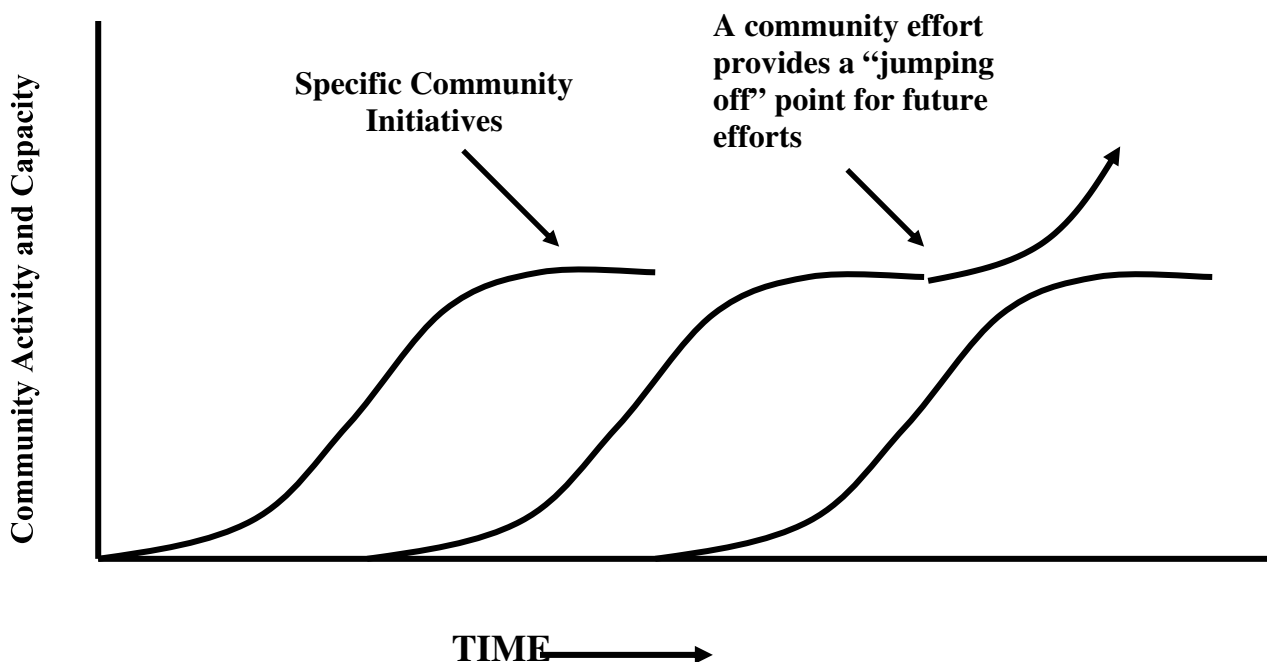


Figure 5. Community development as a succession of specific community efforts.

In managing a community development process much relies on balance. Communities need to be action-oriented and start "on the ground" work early. At the same time, they must avoid "jumping to solutions" and spend time exploring and rethinking issues – "ready, aim, fire", rather than "ready, fire, aim"!

Community members must trade off following up on immediate concerns, with also addressing fundamental issues. They need to organise and structure a community effort while retaining flexibility and versatility. Communities must also reconcile the support of formal leaders and established “culture” with the need to retain informal leadership and “grassroots” ideas that may go against the norm.

The crux is that community development is more than a planning process. It is an ongoing learning process where new attitudes and networks develop from action and reflection (figure 6.) The appropriate use of the principles of community development guide the process rather than a recipe or prescription.

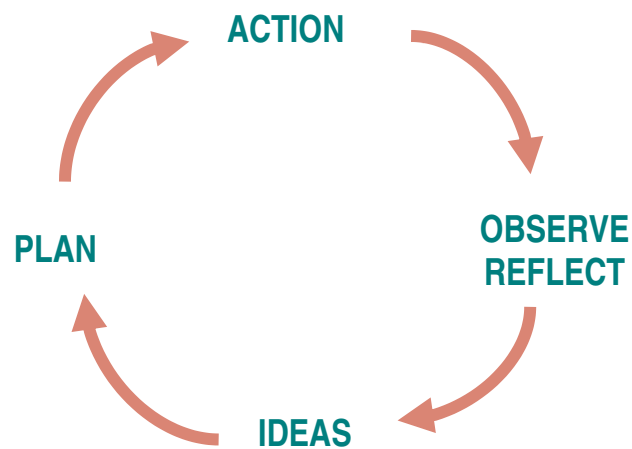


Figure 6. The action learning cycle – fundamental to processes of community development (Source: Building Rural Leaders, Dept of Primary Industries).

Outcomes

The outcome of successful community development is communities that are more able to generate wealth, maintain or improve their competitive position, preserve and use community resources and adapt to change (Shaffer, 1989).

Specific outcomes are:

- An expanded, diverse, inclusive citizen participation base,
- An expanded leadership base,
- Strengthened individual skills,
- A widely shared, understood and agreed local or regional vision for the future,
- A strategic community agenda (ie a widely agreed strategic plan),
- Consistent, tangible progress toward community goals,
- More effective community organisations,
- Better use of resources. (adapted from Aspen Institute, 1996)

Pitfalls

Communities need to avoid several pitfalls.

Focusing only on “symptoms”.

Many apparent problems in communities, such as local bank closures, have a more fundamental cause, such as the impact of electronic banking. The issue may be as much about access to, and training in, the use of information technology as fighting to retain the physical branch and local bank jobs. Community people need to identify

these fundamental aspects of apparent problems. They can easily only focus on the “symptom”, without doing what they can to address the “seat of the fire”.

Burnout

The bulk of community work often falls to the willing few. Even major community movements involving hundreds of people often depend on the dedication of a few individuals. These community innovators and leaders face “burnout”. Communities can share the load by:

- fostering new leaders and innovators by for example, creating opportunities for others to gain experience in running a meeting, or attending a seminar; or arranging for organised leadership training,
- make activities fun and social, and held at a time that is convenient for a broad cross section of people to attend,
- invite people to participate personally because their contribution will be valued,
- ask people to give a temporary commitment for say six weeks, rather than join a committee indefinitely.

Starting Big

Communities can overcommit themselves by starting too big or expecting things to happen too quickly. It is easy for expectations to build beyond the capability of the community to deliver. Feasibility questions and the “influence test” are important to avoid this – is it feasible and able to be implemented?, what can and can’t the community influence?, and “of all the things we could do, what are the few that we can do?”

Lasting community development processes grow steadily depending on patience and stamina, not a “change the world” approach. It is usually incremental improvement – evolution, not revolution.

Planning without action

Communities can overplan and underact. While planning is very important to organising and using scarce resources efficiently, planning for too long before action can easily frustrate citizens. People will give any community effort a certain amount of time to demonstrate its usefulness before they lose faith in the process. Action needs to start early and be conducted in conjunction with planning.

Assuming the community is “represented”.

It is easy to assume that citizens and community organisations participating in development work represent the bulk of the community. People can also assume that who attends activities are all the local people that are interested. Both inferences are often false. The nature, location and time of meetings and events will affect who can attend. Community representatives often fall short of actively gaining the input of their “constituency” nor extensively feedback the results of meetings etc.

Communities need to be aware of these limits to participation and information flow and not assume a full community mandate. The most resistance to community efforts comes from community members themselves.

What Community Development is Not

We have discussed the components, principles and processes of community development. Final clarification comes from describing what community development is not.

It isn't service delivery: Rural people are clearly demanding greater service delivery from both government and the private sector. Clearly, providers should give the best service possible. Yet community development is more than delivering services. Delivering what "clients" perceive they need does little to stimulate the "rethinking", social networks or leadership that builds the ability of communities to manage change.

It isn't social work or welfare: In a community development process, many communities may aim to improve the situation of the unemployed, ill, disabled or poor, strengthen social interaction, or improve social support services. However, community development is not a social welfare program. It is a self-directed process aimed at a broad range of economic, social and environmental community benefits.

It isn't a "feel good" exercise: Community development produces real "bricks and mortar" and "dollars and cents" outcomes. It achieves this through cooperative action, rethinking and organisation. But it involves a lot of action and work. It is far more than a morale boosting exercise.

Conclusion

Community development is a process that leads to not only more jobs, income and infrastructure, but also communities that are better able to manage change. Community members can better mobilise existing skills, reframe problems, work cooperatively and use community assets in new ways.

Principles of self help and participation guide a flexible process. While there is no recipe, major steps are identifying existing concerns, engagement, self examination, exploration, prioritisation, planning and action.

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