

Key Principles of Sustainable Community Development

Jean Richardson (2000) suggested seven principles or strategies to help sustainable community development. While Richardson was thinking in terms of rural communities, this strategies could equally apply to larger communities or urban neighborhoods.

These strategies include:

- Empower community members
- Strengthen democracy
- Encourage women to be key leaders
- Involve children and adolescents
- Encourage systems thinking
- Encourage innovation
- Foster rural and urban linkages

Empowering community members is of paramount importance so that community development is community-based and community-driven. If community, or economic, development efforts are to have a lasting influence on the community it must be from the bottom-up or grass-roots. Top-down or command-and-control efforts often have short-term impacts on the community.

Strengthen democracy is required to ensure that there is broad-based citizen involvement which in turns promotes new leadership development. A strong tradition of local democratic processes creates an environment that encourages widespread citizen participation which brings local knowledge and ideas to the table.

Encouraging women to be key leaders helps bring an essential ingredient of community values and complex participatory skills to the table. Research suggests that women approach community (political) decision-making in a manner that is more conducive to sustainable community development; decision-making is depersonalized and inclusive.

Involving children and adolescents brings different perspective to the discussions, encourages higher levels of community leadership and volunteerism in the long-term, and enhances the democratic process. Many communities wish to establish an environment that is attractive to retaining youth in the community or returning youth after higher education. In addition, these communities want to become attractive to younger families. Involving youth in community discussions and decision-making can help the community move toward these goals.

Encouraging systems thinking helps communities think beyond narrow crises and/or emergencies. Unfortunately, many communities are reactionary in their approach to community issues and move from one emergency to the next as they arise. This can often result in tunnel vision and lose sight of the whole forest for the individual trees. By encouraging a systems thinking approach, such as the Shaffer Star or the Floras' Community Capitals, the community can move toward a more proactive view of the community and better understand how the different elements of the community are interconnected.

Encouraging innovation must be fostered at all levels of the community, both within-side and out-side the community including those institutions that shape our societal structure. Within economics innovation is the driving force behind growth and development. These can be new products, technologies or processes (ways of doing things or approaching problems). In a community development setting innovation means thinking about new ways to address the concerns of the community. This can range from how local government is structured to how non-profits interact with each other to the role of religious organizations in discussing community issues. In the end, sustainable community development hinges on innovative thinking.

Foster rural and urban linkages While Richardson was writing about rural community development and was pointing to the importance of the rural community to nearby urban centers one could argue more generally that communities, whether rural or urban, do not function in isolation. Any community is part of a larger economic and social system. In economic development the notion that economic clusters can cover large geographic areas has prompted many communities to appreciate a cooperative or regional approach to economic development.

In the end, these strategies can be summarized as inclusive proactive decision-making where people are encouraged to think outside the box (innovation). In a strictly technical sense one could say that these appear to be more closely tied to goals or objectives than strategies. Specifically, how a community accomplishes these principals is not explicitly stated. In other discussions about if a community is ready to undertake economic development initiatives we have implicitly argued that community development is a necessary but not sufficient condition for economic development. One could view Richardson's principals as a statement of those necessary conditions that need to be in place before the community undertakes economic development efforts.

Richardson, J. (2000). *Partnerships in Communities: Reweaving the Fabric of Rural America*. Island Press: Washington DC.