Engaging Community Hearts, Minds and Spirit in Sustainable Development

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Public engagement and accountability are critical for achieving sustainable urban development. However, achieving sustainable development in this extremely complex arena, is exceedingly challenging. This is exacerbated by the dynamics of decision-making and action. To be effective, public engagement and accountability require leaders who understand the structural elements and special leadership requirements for this arena. Effective leaders engage community hearts, minds and spirit to energize and sustain community action toward their goals.

This paper describes the structural elements that must be understood so as to design effective processes. It then describes the leadership framework discovered in the research to foster successful implementation. Finally, it shows how linking the structural considerations to the framework enabled communities to achieve success. Although focusing on the community level, the lessons are applicable to other levels as well.

Structure

Understanding structure and how to work with it are necessary for successful goal implementation. Structure includes both the structure of the community and the structural dynamics that guide decisions and action, guiding the community either forward toward the goals or into forward/backward oscillation that arrives nowhere.[1] Unless they work effectively with these two types of structure, communities will be unlikely to progress. Leaders who understand both kinds of structure and the leadership requirements in this environment can guide communities forward more readily.

Community Structure

Why does the structure of communities demand a special approach? It is because achieving sustainable development goals requires the participation and support of myriad organizations and individuals, goals, cultures, priorities and operations with different values, resources and levels of influence. It requires community collaboration around shared priorities and commitment and action over a long period.

Community structure is a network of nodes of multi-sector individuals and organizations, interconnected loosely in a plethora of combinations: it is complex and unstable. Participants connect with some others but not with all. Participation is inconsistent: people participate at different times; the make-up of the arena is always changing and uncertain. Individuals often represent an entire organization, itself often complex, which must be brought along. Issues come and go, often unpredictably. No one is in charge or in control; participation is generally

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[1] Robert Fritz, *The Path of Least Resistance: Learning to Become the Predominant Creative Force in Your Own Life.* (New York, Random House, 1989).

voluntary. The arena often seems chaotic, a garbage can of stuff in which "organizations make choices without consistent shared goals,"[2]

This form (Fig. 1) is very different from that of a single organization, in which lines of communication and authority are relatively clear, participation is relatively stable, and expectations are set by top leaders.
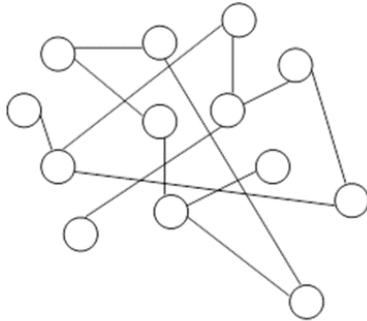

Figure 1. Typical chaotic and dynamic community structure

Leadership to achieve sustainable development goals requires an approach appropriate to the complex arena. Ordinary organizational leadership approaches that assume stability and control, are not applicable. As will be shown later, it requires leaders who can engage the hearts, minds and spirit of communities.[3]

Energizing Structure

A second kind of structure underlies decision-making and action. It can energize communities to move forward or to reverse and stall, to success or to failure to achieve sustainable development goals.[4] (Figure 2). Although this energizing structure underlies all action and is well understood in the arts and sciences, its application to human behavior and to sustainable development is still relatively unknown. Consisting of thinking, beliefs and positions of the people and organizations involved, it provides the foundation for advancement or to oscillation back and forth.

In the physical realm, dunes and tides illustrates how structure underlies these two patterns of movement. Sand dunes move inexorably inland impelled by the underlying structure comprised of the relationship among the tides, winds, waves, ocean currents and storms.[5] Many coastal

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[2] Michael D. Cohen, James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "A Garbage Can Model of Administrative Choice," Administrative Science Quarterly 17 (1) (1972) 1-25.

[3] Barbara A. Coe, *Engaging Community Hearts, Minds, and Spirit: Leadership for a Sustainable World.* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. US. 2017).

[4] Robert Fritz, *The Path of Least Resistance.*

[5] Barbara Coe, Ricardo Burgo Braga, Nelson Sambaqui Gruber, *Sustainable Development of Jaguaruna, Brazil* (Unpublished Paper, 2014).

communities have ignored this structure: sand covers sidewalks and gardens and curves around the sides of buildings. Bulldozers busily work to take the sand away -- but at what cost and with what likelihood of success? The dunes will continue to shape the coastal landforms as they have for thousands of years.

The pattern of sand dunes can be contrasted with that of tides.[6] The tides come in – and then they go out again, governed by the relationship among elements such as drift currents, rip currents, winds, sea level rise and many other components. Inevitably they will reverse and recede because of the structural foundation. Because of their structures, dunes advance, while tides move forward and then backward.

Alternative Patterns of Action
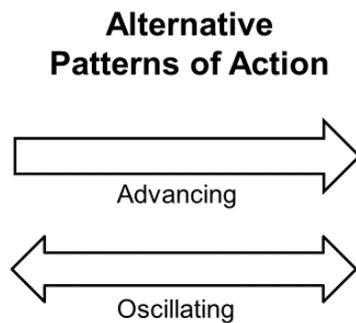
Source: Fritz, 1989, 1996

Figure 2. Alternative Patterns of Action

Similarly, structural foundations guide people to either advance or oscillate.[7],[8] They can advance when they focus upon a desired state and, at the same time, the current state. The difference between the two creates what is called structural tension. The nature of tension is to resolve (imagine a rubber band being stretched), so the energy created propels movement. This simple structure, with only one goal, supports a pattern of advancement. Thus, with a clear, shared vision or goal and also shared understanding of the relevant current state, a community can move steadily forward.

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[6] Barbara Coe, Roberto Burgo Braga, Nelson Sambaqui Gruber, *Sustainable Development.*

[7] Robert Fritz, *The Path of Least Resistance.*

[8] Robert Fritz, *Corporate Tides: The Inescapable Laws of Organizational Structure*. (San Francisco Berrett-Koehler, 1989)

**Structural tension contains energy
that propels us forward**

Starting
Point ➡️ Goal A

**General pattern of movement
is forward**

Source: Fritz, 1989, 1996

Figure 3. Structural tension

However, when two or more (explicit or explicit) conflicting goals exist simultaneously, this creates a complex, rather than simple, structure.[9] In such a structure, the tension shifts from one goal to another, causing a shift in focus back and forth, oscillating from one to the other, rather than advancing. This is structural conflict, conflict derived from the underlying structure.

Contrasts with structural conflict

Starting
point ➡️ Goal One

⬅️ Goal Two

**General pattern of movement
is oscillation**
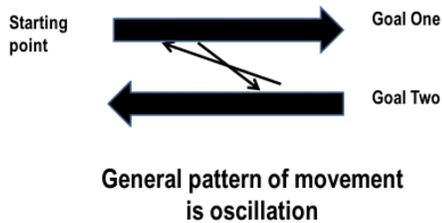
Source: Fritz, 1989, 1996

Figure 4. Structural conflict

Sustainable community development efforts are rife with structural conflicts stemming from differing goals among different stakeholders, which drive forward-backward oscillation.[10] For example, often developers have one goal in mind, such as developing where, when and how they wish without regard for the goals of others, such as preserving an area. In this situation, each of the groups has a different tension resolution system; the tension and energy shift from one to the other, producing a pattern in which each group is focused in a different direction. As tension increases in one tension system, it energizes movement in one direction; as it increases

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[9] Robert Fritz, *Corporate Tides.*
[10] Barbara Coe, *Engaging Community Hearts, Minds, and Spirit.*

in another, movement reverses, oscillating. The only remedy is to find a common aim.

**Oscillation Between Development
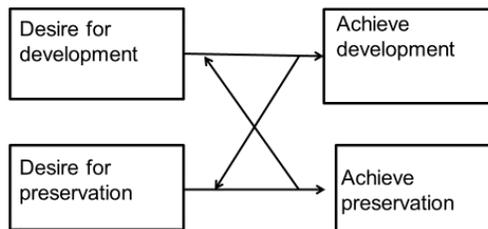and Preservation**

Figure 5. Oscillation between Development and Preservation

Structural conflict may occur even within groups with a shared goal if they become distracted by lesser such as how to organize or reaction to an external event, while failing to maintain focus on the primary aim.[11]

Structural conflict also results when parties operate from different views of the current state or assumptions about the future.[12] For example, pro-development groups may deny negative environmental effects of development while environmental groups may assert that any kind of development will be disastrous. Participants must clarify what is factual and what is merely conjecture. Both a shared vision or goal and common understanding of reality are necessary to develop structural tension to help communities move forward.

Structure also limits success when communities focus on problems, rather than on visions or goals.[13], [14], [15] Although required in an emergency, a problem-focus is ineffective in achieving long-term goals. It produces a circular, rather than advancing, pattern. As the illustration shows, problem-driven effort is motivated by a desire for relief, not by a goal. Taking action produces a sense of relief, then less action. Once feeling relief, communities tend to slacken rather than sustaining the energy created by focusing on something they genuinely desire. A problem focus, although appropriate in emergencies, does not permit the sustained focus necessary to achieve sustainable development.

Efforts in Denver to curb gang related violence illustrate how a problem-focus can result in some improvement and then return of the problem.[16]

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[11] Barbara Coe, *Engaging Community Hearts, Minds, and Spirit.*

[12] Barbara Coe, *Engaging Community Hearts, Minds, and Spirit*.

[13] Barbara Coe, *Engaging Community Hearts, Minds, and Spirit.*

[14] Robert Fritz, *The Path of Least Resistance.*

[15] Peter Senge, *The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Organizations Are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World* (New York, Doubleday, 2008.)

[16] Phillips, Noelle, "Homicides in Denver hit 9-year high with 50 people killed in 2015." *Denver Post*, January 17. http://extras.denverpost.com/homicides/2015.

**Problem Focus
Leads to Nothing**

Problem returns → Seek relief from problem → Take action → Feel relief → Take less action → (Problem returns)

Coe 2006, Fritz 1996, Senge 2008

Figure 6. Problem-focus

Communities need not continue the kind of either/or approach to development decisions that produces only oscillation. Providing for economic needs while protecting natural and social environments, that is, sustainable development, is possible. It requires myriad interests to come together around some common aims and take appropriate action, often for a prolonged period, stimulating effective public engagement and commitment. Research and application showed that successful leaders engage community hearts, minds and spirit using processes designed to guide the community forward.

Findings from two case studies: doctoral dissertation research of The Denver, Partnership in Denver, Colorado, USA[17] and the application of the resulting framework to the project: Communities Engaged in Social and Economic Development of Albania (CESEDA), illustrate how effective leaders engage communities to achieve their goals.[18] The research suggests that this approach to leadership and implementation can improve substantially the implementation of sustainable development aims.

Denver Partnership Research

Following is a summary of the results of the Denver Partnership research.[19], [20], [21] The Denver Partnership is a public/private partnership dedicated to wise development of the city's rapidly-growing downtown. Previously home to pawn shops and bars, followed by rampant development, the City seemed slated to become a traffic-clogged, chaotic mess. Thanks to

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[17] Barbara A Coe, An Open Focus Framework for Goal Implementation in Public-Private Partnerships. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Dissertation Information Service, 1986.)

[18] Barbara A Coe, "Linking Communities and Government for Social and Economic Development: How Villagers in Albania Worked with Government to Change Minds and Improve Condition." (*Journal of the Public Administration Academy*, Yerevan, Armenia, 2013, 39-9).

[19] Barbara A Coe, An Open Focus Framework for Goal Implementation in Public-Private Partnerships.

[20] Barbara A Coe, "Open Focus: Implementing Projects in Multi-Organizations Settings*." International Journal of Public Administration,* 11 (4) 503-26, 1988.

[21] Barbara A Coe, Open Focus: A Community Development Model," Journal of the Community Development Society 21 (2): 1991, 18-35.

some of the actions of leaders, the downtown became a vibrant, exciting place to live, work and play. The research produced a framework for successful implementation called "open focus." The framework was later modified to incorporate principles of structural dynamics discovered by Robert Fritz.[22]

The research identified showed four main factors to explain success in implementing major projects. The factors are: 1. Open Focus; 2. Collaborative Vision; 3. Linking communication; and 4. Evocative Leadership. The resulting framework was expanded after learning about structural dynamics in human behavior.

Open Focus

Open focus refers to the overarching attitude and approach, both open and also focused on specific ends. Success required collaboration for people to engage enthusiastically toward shared aims; collaboration required openness to others and their ideas.

The Denver Partnership held extensive collaborative planning discussions with members, all major community leaders, not the general public. To be successful, however, members had to be sensitive to the community as a whole, since most projects involved public funding. When they showed more commitment to the good of the community than to their own self-interest or need to be recognized, people trusted them. When they showed openness to others' experiences and desires rather than pushing hard for their own ideas, they gained support. At the same time, Partnership leaders established and focused on specific and limited shared goals, not on a scattershot of diverse or vague wishes.

Partnership leaders also demonstrated shared understanding of the current status so as to tailor actions appropriately. They then sustained focus on the major shared goals, one at a time.

The other three factors in the framework revealed by the research included the following:

Collaborative Vision

Effective leaders engage community hearts and spirit with an inspiring, shared vision. Vision and goals inspire and energize enthusiastic participation when they come from the community, not from outside or even from a leader presenting a vision for others to follow. Conversely, when they take a top down approach, trying to sell the community on a plan after they developed it, they meet with public resistance.

Linking Communication

Linking communication helps to engage the community more fully. This has two aspects. First is the establishment of mechanisms to spread accurate information widely and assure transparency about meetings and decisions so that people understand the community plans and how they are developed. The Denver Partnership meetings open to public observation and frequent news releases helped to assure open dissemination of information. Effective leaders show respect for public opinion and don't' attempt to withhold information or manipulate the public with overblown promises They often go beyond mere transparency, actively seeking information from those willing and able to provide it, recognizing that local knowledge is invaluable.

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[22] Robert Fritz, *Corporate Tides.*

The second aspect of linking communication is open communication -- the manner in which leaders communicate.[23] They exhibit empathy to others and to their participation and ideas. They use *focused* listening, being present with the speaker, mindfully and respectfully, truly interested in what is being said and in the speaker's experience. They are not defensive or resistant to ideas different from their own; nor do they employ intimidation, force or manipulation. They support and mentor people so as to increase capacity of everyone to help the community progress. They are supportive of those participating and encourage them to be involved as they wish. When engaging community members in this way, Partnership leaders mobilized the support of the community.

Evocative Leadership

Effective leaders understand that achieving sustainable development requires the leadership of many people working toward the same desired future. They don't see leadership as a zero-sum game or hold leadership closely; they don't consider themselves to be the only or even the primary leaders. In other words, they are not ego-centric but rather focused on the community vision and what is needed to reach it. They deliberately cultivate and build the leadership capacity of others, helping them embrace and hone open focus principles and practices. This quality may be the one that sets these leaders apart, more than any other.

Since the membership of the Denver Partnership is comprised of people who lead major public and private organizations, that leadership would be shared was a foregone conclusion. Success required that different leaders take ownership of different aspects and participate in ways they thought necessary to achieve the goals they set. They were most successful when they worked as a team and didn't attempt to dominate.

The research also showed that when community leaders employ traditional modes of hierarchical leadership, they are unlikely to succeed in this arena. Leaders who are authoritarian or controlling or attempt to "sell" others on their ideas, tend to get strong resistance. When they focus on obtaining personal rewards they are suspect. When wedded to their own perspective and closed to others' ideas or are closed to leadership by others they encounter passivity and inertia. When they withhold information or fail to create adequate communication channels, they limit widespread participation and lose community energy. When they ignore feelings and needs of participants or would-be participants and communicate with them in a denigrating or thoughtless manner, they squelch interest and foster opposition.

Application of Revised Framework to CESEDA Project

The project, Communities Engaged in Social and Economic Development of Albania (CESEDA) achieved extraordinary results using as its foundation the Open Focus framework amended to include understanding of structural dynamics. This section describes the project and its results, derived from the project leader's observation and subsequent documentation.[24],[25] The results show how the framework was applied to the four implementation steps and how leaders guided communities to achieve their goals even in very difficult circumstances.

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[23] *J.R. Gibb "*Defensive Communication*," Journal of Communication*, Volume 11, Issue 3, 1 September 1961,141–148.

[24] Barbara A Coe, "Linking Communities and Government for Social and Economic Development."
[25] Barbara A Coe, Engaging Community Hearts, Minds, and Spirit.

The project was designed to engage people actively in the improvement of their own communities. The country, one of the poorest in Europe, suffered from extreme neglect and disrepair. Albanian citizens had no experience with self-help, having been forbidden during the 50-year long Stalinist style communist dictatorship to meet or to take action on their own. Outside-in, top-down efforts by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) did little to build capacity. However, using this framework, fifty communities in this project completed fifty-eight significant projects to improve their communities and their capacity.

Open Focus

CESEDA was an inclusive, public participation project. Eight field coordinators, in male/female teams of two, and a lead coordinator, all local people knowledgeable about Albania, began by contacting local leaders such as education and health clinic administrators, who provided information about the villages and helped to organize groups. They aimed to include all who wished to be involved. They then facilitated the processes so as to engage participants in making their own decisions. They first guided them to set specific, clear, meaningful goals.

Collaborative Vision

CESEDA engaged community hearts and spirit by eliciting visions and goals directly from hundreds of participants who met in small groups in each village. What most people wanted were major improvements in infrastructure: roads, schools, health clinics. Most projects of this sort in Albania discounted such aims as too lofty to be "realistic." As one participant said with amazement: "no one ever asked us what *we* wanted before!" By tapping into their true desires, field coordinators energized and motivated community members. Although people may never have considered the possibility of a better future, when their imaginations soar and they start to focus on what might be, they are transformed and start to see possibilities. Effective leaders tap into those heartfelt dreams and the spirit of the community, mobilizing action.

Linking Communication

CESEDA didn't require sophisticated communication mechanisms, only posters on buildings such as schools or health clinics. Field coordinators would generally simply ask community leaders for suggestions. Then, word of mouth did the rest. People would often come to groups they saw meeting, to learn more and to ask to participate. Coordinators encouraged participation using the practices of open communication: sharing information openly and treating all participants equally, welcoming, respecting and supporting them throughout the entire process from planning to implementation.

Evocative Leadership

CESEDA leadership was informal; none of the participants held a formal leadership position. The field coordinators encouraged people to come forward and take on leadership of the priority projects the villagers identified.

The field coordinators used these four factors as they guided the community groups through the four steps dictated by structural dynamics.

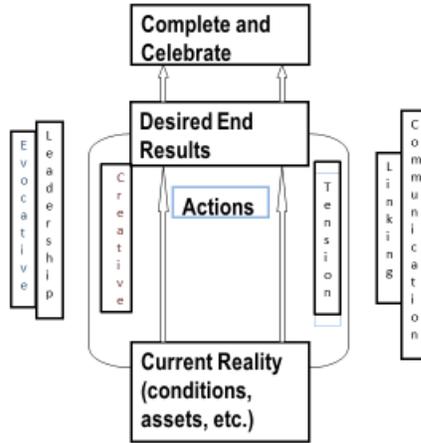**Framework for Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals**

Figure 7. Framework for implementation of sustainable development goals

Planning, Implementation and Evaluation

In this four-step process, planning and implementation were linked.[26] When community hearts, minds and spirit are engaged, planning can lead naturally into implementation. Ongoing evaluation helps the community adjust its actions when necessary.

Step One: Vision

CESEDA field coordinators first guided community groups to produce a collaborative vision. The vision impels and guides action because it engages community hearts and expresses the community's values, desires, and character, or spirit. Field coordinators pushed participants to describe their real desired end results, not a problem to solve, not the means for reaching the desired future and not limited to what people might consider "possible," since no one knows what might be achieved in the future. They stressed that it had to be concrete enough for the community to recognize although not necessarily numerically measurable.

Some communities in Albania focused on their desire for roads to transport agricultural products to markets, their families to medical care and their children to school. They saw how their lives could change. Simple charts helped the community focus and stay focused as they took action toward their goals.
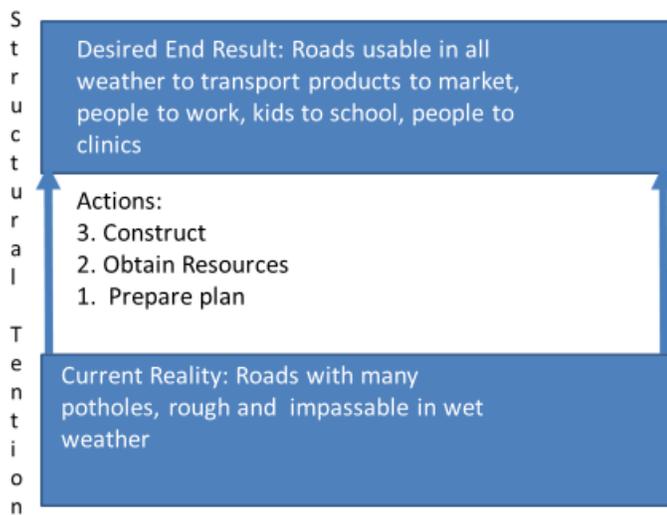
Figure 8. CESEDA Planning and implementation chart

Step Two: Current Reality, the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Field coordinators then engaged community minds, guiding them to understand the current reality, relevant to the vision. Accuracy about the relevant current reality is as necessary as is clarity about the community vision. Without knowing the current status, knowing what steps to take is impossible, yet, remarkably, this step is often ignored in community planning. Moreover, when the community is clear about both the vision or desired end results and the current reality, structural tension is automatically established; this is the essential key for the community to stay focused and advance.

The current reality includes the current state, the assets available and any real barriers to advancing toward the vision. Although local people have knowledge of the community, people tend to distort reality until they explore it more deeply. CESEDA coordinators asked probing questions to help the community members think clearly about the reality.

People commonly distort reality by making assumptions, being vague, hiding the reality, making things up, and exaggerating the negative or positive.[27] People often make assumptions about what is happening even in the face of contrary evidence. They cling to views about the future, even though we cannot know the future or what will be the result of a certain action. The best that can be done is to make educated guesses. People often describe reality in vague terms, such as bad, good, ugly, which don't say enough about the reality to be useful. The detail must be fleshed out. Sometimes people ignore reality; it may be embarrassing or too painful to face. When people are uncomfortable with uncertainty, they often make up something to fill the void. People exaggerate the negative or positive, depending upon their life stance. Some expect bad things to happen. Others have outlawed negative thinking and refuse to look at anything they

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[27] Robert Fritz, *Corporate Tides.*

think seems negative. In either case, ignoring the reality will limit effectiveness. People also see reality differently from each other; when groups have different views of reality, they cannot move forward in concert.

CESEDA coordinators asked questions to help participants clarify the current status relevant to the desired future, pushing them to be specific and to question their assumptions so as to help communities develop an objective, shared view of reality. Groups were initially reluctant to discuss their priorities with their elected officials, claiming that "they won't listen; they don't care; they already know what we need; they won't help." However, when the field coordinators asked what was the worst that could happen, participants finally agreed to meet the officials. In those meetings, they changed their view when the officials helped in myriad ways (Fig. 9).
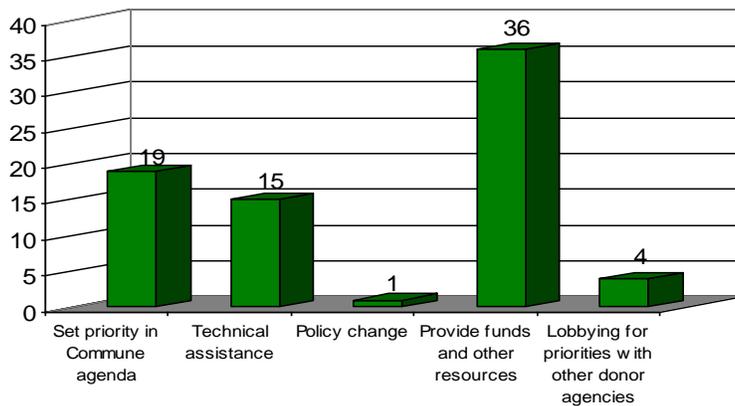

Figure 9. Official response to CESEDA community requests

Albanian groups also initially focused only on what they didn't have such as good roads, schools, or clinics. Their descriptions were vague – such as "bad roads," or schools lacking electricity." However, descriptions of reality are only useful when expressed in clear, positive terms about what IS, not about what isn't – such as roads full of potholes and muddy in rainy season or school buildings usable only in daylight hours or with roofs that leaked.

Coordinators helped communities to separate fact from other than fact by examining the presence or lack of evidence.[28] For example: if a community envisions a thriving economy that provides a good livelihood for everyone, how is the economy now and what opportunities are available to all? If a community wants a new road – does it have a road now; if so, what is the condition of the road? If it wants a school, does it have any school and if so what kind of school, relative to the school it wants? If a community has a vision of a clean and green environment, how is the environment now? They stressed that the description should be specific – not simply "bad," described in terms of what actually exists, such as "X amount of funds available," rather than "lack of funds" or "officials expressing opposition," rather than "lack of official support."

Although the groups also failed initially to recognize their assets, they were then amazed to see how much they had available: trained and talented professionals in various fields, the foundation for a road or a shell of a school or clinic, some supplies and as they soon realized, people who could do the actual labor.

Coordinators didn't suggest the communities ignore problems but, rather, not to be driven by them. They encouraged them to identify their assets and resources and also any actual (not

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[28] Robert Fritz, *Corporate Tides.*

imagined or feared) roadblocks, such as known political resistance, especially difficult physical constraints of the road, bridge or school or other known impediments. Fears and doubts can also be included in descriptions. The main point is to bring all relevant aspects into the light to enable logical actions that are likely to lead forward.

Step Three. Action as Experiment

Field coordinators guided communities to select a few broad actions to move them toward their goals from where they were and then to break each of the actions into smaller steps. They encouraged approaching action as an experiment, observing what happens, comparing interim results with the vision then, if the actions weren't leading forward, trying something else. Taking action builds momentum, even when adjustment is required, helping to sustain action, despite challenges that arise. Using this framework, community members obtained some resources, technical advice and provided most of the labor themselves to achieve the 58 major community improvements including roads, bridges, school and clinic renovations and others.

Figure 10. CESEDA community building a road

Step Four: Completion and Celebration

Completion and celebration are two often-overlooked but integral parts of the process to achieve goals. Noting and celebrating progress acknowledges the community for its effort and at the same time further energizes it for the next steps. This is especially critical when relying extensively upon volunteers.

Communities sometimes have trouble agreeing that a project is complete. Some people may want to add more elements. Others may resist completion because it can leave a void. Having another project ready in the wings can preclude this kind of slump. Leaders can help them assess the value of completing or continuing.

Celebrations take many forms, from simple words of praise for a task well done to important in-house ceremonies or community-wide celebrations with food, music and public speeches. Expressing appreciation about favorite aspects of their communities is a powerful way for people to celebrate. In Albania, community festivals provided both a means for developing organizing skills and fun for Albanian residents.

A village festival to promote turkey sales for New Year's Day was continued in subsequent years, providing increased income, reduced transportation costs (for sellers previously taking their turkeys to the City) and lively community events.

The CESEDA process was challenging because participants had never engaged in self-help activities. This challenge was mitigated by creating first a respectful working and partnership atmosphere, assuring inclusivity and providing a process that engaged community hearts, minds and spirit in a unique and powerful way.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Communities in countries around the world are addressing the need for safe, peaceful, and flourishing communities that provide for the needs of current and future generations, trying to implement sustainable development goals. Although implementing the goals can be most challenging, with the right tools and leadership, communities can progress more readily. Public engagement and accountability are critical for achieving sustainable urban development goals; successful leaders fully engage communities using appropriate tools and processes.

Truly effective leaders put the community first, not seeking personal rewards. Knowing that a problem focus is ineffective, they help communities find their shared, inspiring visions. They know that, although often ignored, local knowledge is vital to success and are open to others' knowledge and understanding of reality. They don't insist that others see things the way they do; they realize that a more complete picture comes from hearing from different people and adjusting the picture to include the most accurate information. They are open to possibilities, to the reality and to leadership by many others. They are open to feedback, establishing effective means to engage the community in all facets of the foundation designed for advancement toward the goals. They treat actions as experiments, assessing what might need alteration. They acknowledge and celebrate effort and small and large wins. Most importantly, they demonstrate how to use the motivating and energizing structural tension to enable communities move forward and build their capacity to stay focused so as to keep moving forward toward sustainable development goals.

Such leaders are able to engage the hearts, minds and spirit of communities to energize, mobilize, and then sustain motivation and action to move consistently toward sustainable development goals. Further testing of the process has the potential to produce rapid, major improvement in the successful implementation of sustainable development goals.

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