

Community Development: A key to sustainability

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Abstract

Communities are complex systems that are subject to vulnerabilities and challenges. However, they are also systems that are capable of recreating, developing and transforming themselves. In a world that is seeking sustainability both globally and locally, the function of community development becomes extremely critical. Community development can serve as a tool to define sustainability, communicate the need for sustainability and promote sustainability. Through prescribed action and measurement of specific indicators, the community or societal system can achieve both individual and community health and vitality.

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While sustainability is commonly seen as fundamental to global and local community well-being, the action of sustainability is yet to be clearly understood. Perhaps the reason that sustainability remains a puzzle is due to the complexity associated with human and environmental systems. Where does one begin, where does an organization begin and where does a community as a whole begin? Who leads the work, who does the work, who supports and measures the work? This article illustrates a case study that utilizes the tool of community development to achieve broad systemic change. Systemic change is intended to improve both human health and community sustainability. Two international initiatives are brought together to support the thinking and strategy. The first initiative is from the World Health Organization (WHO) and is the healthy community initiative. The second is the United Nations University (UNU) Regional Centre of Expertise for Sustainable Development.

The WHO Healthy Community Initiative sees three factors as key to human health: economic, environmental and social factors. All are necessary for healthy communities and healthy people. When a community can bring all three factors to the forefront of planning and service delivery, the outcomes will pay huge dividends. The UN Decade for sustainable development seeks partnerships among global communities, all of whom are recognized for sustainable development particular to their own community's priorities, needs and challenges. The factors identified by UNU as necessary for sustainability are the same as those identified for human health: economic, environmental and social factors. With a balance and strategy linking all three factors, a community can achieve sustainability.

While, theoretically, the two international initiatives are clear, thought provoking and broad, community development is necessary to achieve these initiatives at the local level. Through community development, one can integrate systems, processes, people and action. International leadership in community development adds credibility and significance to the results, and builds excitement among stakeholders and leaders.

The Sudbury Example

Community and political leaders in Sudbury, Ontario, recognized the need for change in both human and community health. These leaders recognized the vulnerability of a one-industry centre, and the impact of the industry on the ecosystem and human health. The change was to occur through macrosystems driven at the individual level. It would require political and community leadership and shared toward a common purpose. It would require broad representation and an ability to maintain the interest and momentum of the partners and the community.

Sudbury is located 4 hours north of Toronto and is a community of 150,000 people. The community remains dependant upon the global mining market for nickel and copper. The regional population of Northeastern Ontario (500,000 people) enables Sudbury to support a broad range of services, including regional centre activities for Northeastern Ontario in industries such as education and health care. The city has thrived on grassroots community development in areas such as earth care, health care and economic development. Sustainable action is strong at the micro, or organizational, level. The challenge of what had yet to be achieved was the macrosystemic and planned approach to change.

Recognizing the barriers of a one-industry town, and the impact of that industry on the sustainability of the community and population, City Council prioritized the need for macrosystem development. To achieve its mission of a growing, world-class community bringing talent, technology, and a great northern lifestyle together, city council supported the development of a healthy community strategy. City Council was the right instigator of change through its elected, accountable and transparent leadership model. The strategy development was delegated to a team of community experts in 2004. They were tasked with developing the strategy, garnering community support, providing the map to success, the road to achievement and the model for community engagement. The strategy was adopted by City Council and became corporate policy.

Healthy Community Strategy

A key component of the strategy is the Healthy Community Charter, which calls for mentoring, modelling, education, and advocacy to move the community forward to its goal of human and community health and community sustainability. Recognized partners in this strategy are individuals, corporations/organizations and government. Recognizing the complexity of the system, a model was adopted that would provide a role for all partners—organizational, community and individual (see Figure 1).

Key Factors for Success

In the process of developing the strategy, recruiting the champions, executing the strategy and building engagement, Sudbury practiced a model of community development. They tackled a complex issue, set benchmarks for success, developed projects to influence change and a means to celebrate the engagement and success of others. Through broad-based social marketing, the barriers to community health and sustainability were gradually being eroded. Most importantly,

the community recognized the strength of their members, the perseverance of their community and set standards for the future.

Setting Priorities

The City of Sudbury celebrated its 125^h birthday in 2008. As a relatively mature community, the systemic barriers holding the community back from its desired goals were well documented and researched by a variety of organizations, each seeking to advance its singular priorities, whether economically, environmentally or socially based. Sustainable, systemic change would need to appreciate the work that had been done, understand the challenges that had been identified and mobilize the key stakeholders to broad implementation of change at a systemic and community levels; most importantly, they needed to respect and celebrate the achievements of all. Through targeted action and broad systemic engagement, the priorities would become community priorities, broadly understood and supported.

Four key organizations were appointed pivotal roles in the work: EarthCare Sudbury, Greater Sudbury Development Corporation, the medical officer of health through the local Health Unit and the Social Planning Council. City council formally recognized and encouraged the development of Community Action Networks (CANs)—grassroots economic and social development groups—across the community. By 2009, 13 CANs were engaged and recognized the work of the Healthy Community Strategy within their terms of engagement.

The Healthy Community Cabinet formally identified the challenges of the community through previous strategic plans, task force reports and other relevant documentation. These challenges became the focus of the the Cabinet's work (and are listed in Figure 2).

Promoting the Healthy Community Initiative

The Healthy Community Initiative will increase awareness of local community initiatives as well as effectively promote good behaviours for both human health and community sustainability.

The purpose of the public awareness campaign is to build a broad-based awareness strategy to inform and educate citizens in Greater Sudbury about the Healthy Community Initiative. In an effort to build public understanding and to tackle the situation of shifting a community's behaviour, an awareness campaign was launched. The strategy begins with an organic campaign with a heavy emphasis on non-traditional advertising. It then transitions to a full-throttle campaign that employs mass media components such as a supporting website and more traditional advertising mediums.

Promoting the four pillars: A flexible, clear, and simple tagline

The social marketing campaign has the daunting task of shifting a community's behaviour while handling a variety of demographics. It also has the task of working with the twelve challenges identified by the Expert Panel in the Healthy Community Strategy. The social marketing campaign provides positive verbiage for citizens to take ownership of their choices and celebrate choices they have already made, validating their successes.

The tagline "I'm part of a healthy community": (a) provides ownership to those who read it, (b) is always followed by a supportive fragmented sentence geared to a specific subject that tackles a key strategic priority and a sustainable development challenge. These headlines encourage positive reinforcement, and build momentum and a sense that our targets belong to a healthy community. The tagline supports the larger idea that "we are part of a healthy community," but it is the chosen sub-tagline that really speaks directly to the sustainable challenge.

Conclusion

Broad systemic change within social systems cannot occur quickly. Deliberate and planned execution of strategy, focused action, community engagement and celebration are critical components to successful and sustainable change. Does Sudbury have the community development model for healthy sustainable development? Will the social marketing strategy achieve the outcomes desired? Will there be improvements in the challenges of the community? Will the community remain engaged and committed? Certainly, all these goals are possible, but not without clear champions, celebration of successes and a desire and commitment for change. Will the leadership of the City Council and the Healthy Community Cabinet maintain its momentum?

The momentum of the model, which incorporates mentoring, modelling, education and advocacy, is expected to continue and magnify. The research modality built into the model will measure the success of this community development initiative.

Figure 1. Healthy community model

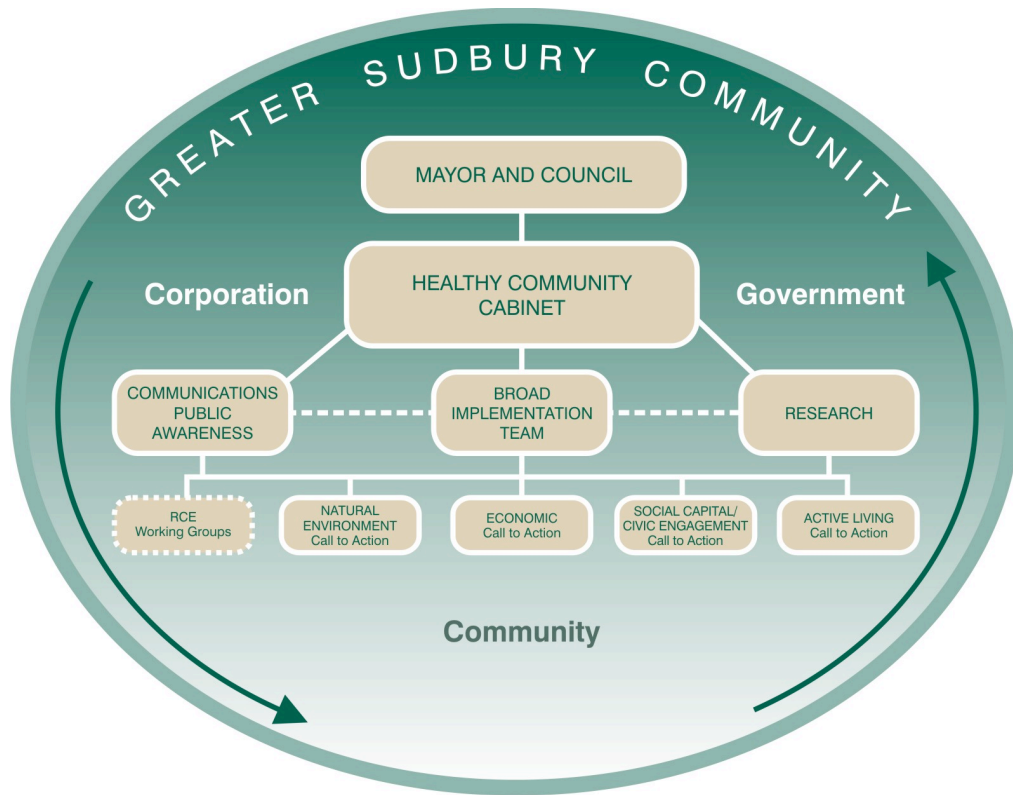


Figure 2. Healthy community challenges

