



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*



THE POWER OF LOCAL ACTION

Learning from Communities on the Frontline of Sustainable Development





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INTRODUCTION

Community-based action, initiated and carried out by local organizations, has an impressive record of successfully delivering development at the local level. This local success is one of the little-told stories of the search for sustainable development over the last two decades.

In the years since the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, UNDP has engaged with many thousands of communities worldwide to support local development in a variety of ways, from development of pro-poor infrastructure, to expanding local government capacity, to helping communities prepare for and recover from natural disasters. A substantial portion of UNDP's local work has involved supporting rural communities in their efforts to sustainably manage local ecosystems in a way that increases local incomes, empowers local residents, and maintains and enhances the environmental services these ecosystems render. In other words, this work has directly dealt with the three strands of sustainable development as they interact at the community level.

This booklet looks broadly across this 20-year history of experience with local ecosystem-based initiatives to present key lessons and insights on how rural communities have successfully met the challenge of sustainable local development. What are the key elements of their success? How can we continue to encourage and scale up successful local action in the future? And can this local-level experience help us address the global development challenges of the next 20 years?

The findings and lessons put forward in this booklet are presented in summary form as an input to a broader discussion on current development practice. The booklet is not intended as an exhaustive treatment of community-based development. For more detailed discussion, readers are encouraged to consult the reports and analyses from which these lessons are drawn, which are listed at the end of the document.

Box 1. What Does “Local” Mean?

“Local” or “community-based” initiatives have the following characteristics:

Local demand. Activities originate locally, as an expression of community demand for economic, social, or environmental benefits, or as a reaction to the loss of these benefits.

Local action. Activities are executed locally by local actors, although they may be supported by outside partners from government, civil society, or the private sector.

Local institution. A local civil society organization is involved in planning, managing, and executing the activity. Local government may also be involved.

Local Benefits. Substantial benefits accrue to local actors, although regional, national, and global benefits are often generated as well.

GLOBAL CHALLENGES, LOCAL INSIGHTS

The Local Level is the Incubator of Sustainable Development

Some of the clearest examples of sustainable development can be seen at the local level in community-driven initiatives centered around the sustainable use of local ecosystems.

For twenty years, nations and communities have labored to translate into practice the ideals of sustainable development first embraced at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This requires integrating social development with economic growth and environmental sustainability. Interweaving these three strands of sustainable development has proven challenging in the field, where a variety of obstacles—persistent poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and distorted markets among them—make it difficult to find the path toward sustainability.

Proof of the sustainable development concept

In spite of these obstacles, sustainable development successes at the community level are not hard to find. Many can be found in case histories of locally driven development initiatives in which community groups collectively manage local ecosystems to sustain their livelihoods and local cultures. These communities have shown that it is possible to simultaneously increase local incomes and job opportunities, empower small-holder producers, create vibrant and inclusive local institutions, sustain local biodiversity, and foster ecosystem health. Such examples are the proof of concept of a kind of development that promotes the social and economic well-being of communities as well as the health of ecosystems.

Where the three strands of sustainable development really meet

Notably, communities have found that each of these benefits feeds and reinforces the others. In fact, the community level is where the interdependency of the three strands of sustainable development is clearest. Good ecosystem management, originated and carried out by socially embedded local institutions, increases the health and productivity of local environmental assets. This, in turn, can expand and secure the local economy, resulting in more secure and robust local livelihoods.

Delivering green, inclusive growth today

The potential of green, equitable, and inclusive growth is being borne out at the community scale. A 2009 survey of the UNDP-implemented GEF Small Grants Programme estimated that community projects funded through the program had already generated more than half a million jobs in communities around the world. This “local green economy” is focused not just on generating new economic activity, but on delivering social benefits and equity by building capacity within local civil society, generating public goods like community infrastructure, and organizing and empowering local small-holders to participate on a more equal basis in national and international markets.

Putting resilience at the center

The measure of sustainable development at the community level is not just the achievement of development goals today, but resilience in the face of tomorrow's stresses—environmental, social, or economic. Local ecosystem-based initiatives build this kind of resilience within rural communities, layering greater ecosystem stability with increased social capacity and expanded economic potential. This triple resilience is synergistic—it is more than a simple summation of economic, social, and environmental benefits. In effect, it is a dividend of successfully combining the three strands of sustainable development. This is particularly important today, as the threats of climate change, social upheaval, and slowed economic growth loom. It also has implications for national development policy, since resilient nations are built from resilient communities.

Community-Based Solutions Have Been Hard-Won

Successes at the community level have been achieved against a backdrop of obstacles to local action

While there is great potential for local actors to lead development efforts at the community level and manage ecosystems so that they support local livelihoods and build community cohesiveness, working at the local level faces many challenges, and the successes achieved by community-based initiatives have been hard-won, punctuated with setbacks, and informed by failures.

Lack of rights and access

Obstacles to local-level success often start with the lack of legal entitlements and access rights, such as land and resource tenure, that give communities the authority and incentive to manage local ecosystems sustainably and profitably, and protect community assets from appropriation by outside interests. Other important structural obstacles include burdensome regulations and taxes, as well as licensing and permit systems that are biased against small producers. Lack of road, water, and power infrastructure leave rural producers isolated from markets and support services necessary for viable local enterprises. Poor access to credit and other financial services makes it difficult for local initiatives to bankroll their activities.

Community divisions and dysfunctions

At the same time, communities are diverse, often composed of different groups with interests that diverge or compete outright. Social divisions based on class, gender, caste, and livelihood may exacerbate these differences, making it difficult to undertake a joint program of work. In addition, many local actors are plagued with a sense of disempowerment. Even when they possess resource rights and development authority, they may be reluctant to take the initiative to exercise these rights and develop a coherent work plan.

Success takes time

Dealing with these challenges requires building competent local institutions based on principles of participation, so that competing visions of the community initiative can be reconciled, a commitment to joint action forged, and the benefits and costs of the activity apportioned fairly among local stakeholders. This process of building the social capacity of local institutions takes time. So does building the technical and business capacities required to accomplish the group's ecosystem management goals and to translate this into economic benefits. The upshot is that, while local ecosystem-based initiatives can certainly produce benefits in the short term, the timeline for the maturation and ultimate success of these community-based initiatives can be lengthy, with many bumps along the path.

Nonetheless, communities have demonstrated that through persistence, innovation, and the willingness to learn from mistakes, complemented by productive engagement with government, donor, and other partners, the challenges of local action can be met.

UNDP's Commitment to Community-Based Initiatives

UNDP has a longstanding mandate to strengthen local capacity to manage the environment and pursue development goals that make sense in the eyes of local people.

UNDP has been engaged at the local level since the first Rio Earth Summit and before. Today, its involvement in local development spans several different program areas:

- **The GEF Small Grants Programme**, which is implemented by UNDP, funds community-based projects initiated and carried out by communities, local CBOs, and NGOs in the areas of biodiversity, climate change, land degradation, persistent organic pollutants and chemicals, and international waters. Since its inception in 1992, it has financed more than 14,500 local projects in 126 countries, using a decentralized approach in which responsibility for country strategy and funding decisions is vested in a multisectoral National Steering Committee, with a majority from civil society.
- **The Equator Initiative** is a partnership that brings together UNDP, governments, international and local civil society groups, businesses, and grassroots organizations to highlight successful examples of community-centered action that conserves biodiversity and brings social and economic benefits that reduce poverty. Since 2002, the Equator Prize has recognized outstanding efforts in integrated local development in 152 communities, bringing international press attention to these sustainable development successes and creating a network of local actors who can share best practices and inform larger policy processes.
- **The Community Water Initiative**, which is implemented by the Small Grants Programme, supports community-based water resources management and innovative, low-cost water supply and sanitation projects in rural areas. Since 2004, it has funded 157 community projects in 10 countries, bringing water supply and sanitation to more than 1 million people. The goal of the program is to foster water security for local people in a carbon-neutral and climate-resilient manner.
- **The Community-Based Adaptation to Climate Change** project, implemented through the Small Grants Programme, supports community-driven risk management projects in 10 countries to achieve the goal of reducing vulnerability and increasing adaptive capacity to the adverse effects of climate change, as well as building the resilience of communities, ecosystems, and resource-dependent livelihoods.

- The Energy Access Programme expands access to a variety of energy technologies such as solar, wind, micro-hydro, biogas, and improved cook stoves. Through the program, more than 1,500 off-grid decentralized energy initiatives in over 100 developing countries have improved energy security for more than one million beneficiaries a year.
- The UNDP-GEF Communities, Livelihoods, and Markets team coordinates UNDP-GEF's approach to community empowerment for sustainable development and collaborates across UNDP to ensure that community-supportive policies and approaches form part of UNDP's broader strategic framework. More specifically, the CLM focuses on strengthening the adaptive capacity and resilience of communities by providing catalytic support through small grants and other financing, access to knowledge and other empowerment tools, and greater access to markets.

Connecting local to national and global

Notably, these programs are not just confined to the local level, but include a significant effort to amplify and connect local efforts to national and international action by building partnerships and networks across civil society, promoting policy dialogues between local groups and government at all levels, encouraging public awareness and engagement, and incorporating the needs of poor and marginalized communities in national sustainable development planning as well the action plans for international environmental treaties. Also, by connecting communities to knowledge sharing platforms, these programs contribute to the international effort to share best practices and achieve global environment and development goals.

Unifying themes of UNDP's approach to community-driven development

Linking these varied programs is a common approach to local development informed by UNDP's years of local engagement and work with grassroots groups and other community-based organizations. Features of this approach include:

- A belief that experience at the local level must ground national and international development efforts;
- An acceptance of the importance of local institutions as venues for local empowerment and vehicles for community-based action, particularly for the poor and marginalized;
- An understanding of the important role of natural resources to rural livelihoods;
- A commitment to equity and a rights-based approach to development;
- An understanding of the importance of governance factors in effective local action;
- A commitment to long-term and strategic engagement with communities rather than a project-oriented approach;
- An appreciation for the need for a funding mechanism appropriate to local groups.

Together, these themes amount to a new paradigm for local development based on inclusion, resilience, good governance, equity, and accountability. It is predicated on the belief that local and indigenous communities and organizations are the real drivers of sustainable development, and that empowering these groups to build economies and institutions that are equitable, inclusive, and sustainable is one way to catalyze transformative change in rural landscapes.

FIVE INSIGHTS FOR RIO

Community-driven development centered on the management of local ecosystems can shed light on many current development challenges. Here, we list five insights of particular relevance to the themes of the Rio +20 Conference on Sustainable Development, and the messages the development community can take from them. These insights arise from the observation that collectively managing a community asset requires community groups to act in certain ways that strengthen the “social strand” of sustainable development, encourage innovation, and build resilience. Local ecosystem-based initiatives also tend to address basic issues of local well-being like food, water, and energy security, and can often do so at relatively low cost, with implications for aid effectiveness.

1. Prioritizing Social Processes Brings Sustainability and Equity

Successful local organizations attend to the social processes—such as participation, communication, joint goal setting, and the negotiation of work commitments and benefits-sharing within the group—that build social capital, empower group members, and make the group cohere over time.

Community groups that undertake joint management of a local ecosystem rely on the power of collective action to accomplish goals that are beyond the reach of the individuals making up the group. But collective action requires a considerable commitment to social processes like communicating within the group, fostering participation of group members, deciding who will do what, negotiating how benefits will be shared, and resolving conflicts. These processes allow the group to forge a unified vision of what can be accomplished and what benefits can be expected, to decide on an action plan, and to generate the will to carry it through in spite of obstacles or disagreements.

A practical outcome of this attention to social processes is that these local groups tend to place as high a value on producing social benefits such as empowerment, access, security, and equity as they do on generating economic or environmental benefits. The upshot is that such groups effectively prioritize the social strand of sustainable development. In so doing, they increase the social sustainability of the collective project—the ability of the group to continue working together productively.

Message for Rio: Targeting the social sustainability of development activities is required to make them more effective and long-lasting. Community-level work, carried out through local community-based organizations, is a way to achieve that targeting.

2. Local Approaches are the Building Blocks for Food, Water, and Energy Security

Local ecosystem-based initiatives offer a basic entry point to reconfigure local agriculture, watershed management, and energy use with approaches tailored to the local population.

Many local ecosystem-based initiatives feature a direct focus on redefining and revitalizing local smallholder agriculture to increase yields and improve market access through introduction of appropriate technologies, reviving traditional food crops and resource management systems, and creating associations for mutual support, knowledge sharing, and joint marketing. Many others address water security through improved watershed management, more efficient irrigation, and development of local water supply and distribution systems. Still others address energy access through development of microhydro facilities, household biogas systems, and adoption of solar panels and other off-grid energy sources. In this way, community-based initiatives help return control over basic food, water, and power supplies to local people.

At a more fundamental level, local ecosystem-based initiatives support the very basis of food and water security by adopting a landscape approach to ecosystem management that enhances soil and watershed health. Managing ecosystems sustainably necessarily involves such a landscape approach, since the effects of land use decisions, resource extraction, pollution, and other factors that influence ecosystems act at a landscape level. The benefits of this approach also reach beyond the local level by enhancing and sustaining ecosystem services vital to adjacent communities, to national economic sectors, and to the global environment.

Message for Rio: Local well-being begins with food, water, and energy security, yet the delivery of these basic necessities will only get more difficult in the years ahead as the demand for resources surges. Community-based approaches can contribute with projects tailored to a community's particular agricultural setting, microwatersheds, and available energy sources.

3. Community-Based Initiatives Can Promote Conflict Resolution and Peace Building

Local initiatives focused on natural resource management can be a productive forum for grappling with long-standing resource conflicts and can contribute to post-conflict recovery and trust-building.

Many areas are plagued by resource conflicts between adjacent communities or among different resource users within a single community. Case studies show that initiatives centered around common management of an ecosystem service can provide a new opportunity for re-examining and defusing what may be long-standing conflicts, with both sides motivated by the prospect of receiving the benefits associated with cooperative management. Group processes that encourage dialogue and trust building can gradually result in compromises that the parties in conflict

were previously unwilling to make. Settling conflicts within and between communities can also be a prelude to more effective resolution of conflicts with outside forces that threaten to exploit local ecosystems and undermine local development. With local unity and clarity in what communities want, conflict resolution becomes more possible.

In some cases, local ecosystem-based initiatives can also provide a means to stabilize the social and economic conditions in war-torn areas by generating new income sources, providing opportunities for social organizing and community building, and establishing networks and connections with outside organizations and markets. This post-conflict recovery and peace-building process can occur even when the original conflict had little to do with natural resources.

Message for Rio: Local ecosystem-based initiatives offer a promising avenue for conflict resolution and a venue for a larger process of community building that can contribute to post-conflict recovery. The demand for such qualities is great in a world where the effects of conflict as a barrier to development are increasingly clear.

4. Innovation, Adaptation, and Resilience Arise Together with Successful Local Ecosystem-Based Action

Local initiatives are noted for their innovation and ability to combine modern and traditional knowledge. This enables adaptive management and feeds into a cycle of resilience building as economic, social, and environmental gains combine.

Successful local approaches are uniquely tailored to fit the ecosystems and communities involved. Local institutions grow out of local culture and draw from traditional practices and authorities, yet are confronted with an array of modern challenges and social input, from globalization to cell phones and the internet. Innovation and adaptation often occur at this interface of the modern and traditional. From this can arise novel technology applications, reconfiguration of traditional crop and land use patterns to fit modern markets, and other low-cost innovations that increase income and create new routes for local enterprise.

Community groups also innovate in response to new opportunities and inputs, expanding their membership and reconfiguring their mode of participation to reflect new circumstances. For example, the number of women-led groups and groups focused on indigenous rights and the management of indigenous lands has increased rapidly.

When this ability to innovate and adapt combines with the economic, social, and environmental benefits associated with local ecosystem initiatives, communities can build their resilience to a variety of external and internal threats. This is of great relevance today in light of the attention being paid to climate change adaptation. The local level has become the locus of climate change adaptation, and local institutions are uniquely configured to drive this adaptation through innovation.

Message for Rio: Community-based initiatives should be a major focus of our support for climate change adaptation because they foster innovation and build resilience in the three dimensions of social capacity, economic potential, and ecosystem stability.

5. Community-Based Approaches Can Increase Aid Effectiveness

Community-based initiatives can often achieve big results with a relatively small investment

Because community-based initiatives tend to be relatively limited in size, a small amount of financial support can often be catalytic if it is well timed and targeted. Grants delivered to community-based organizations by the GEF Small Grants Programme, for example, are limited to \$50,000, and most are considerably smaller. Recipients of these grants often report that the funds were critical to their initiative's success.

One reason that community-based groups can use funds efficiently is that their operating costs are usually low; most are used to surviving on limited resources using volunteer labor. More importantly, the funds are put to purposes well-aligned with community needs. The effectiveness of the funds received tends to be high because the funded activities are community-generated and community members have directly invested in the project's success. This community investment may be in the form of in-kind contributions of labor or other resources or, in many instances, may involve local co-funding through cash contributions. In any case, the local stake in the venture's success is usually substantial, multiplying the effect of outside aid and increasing the sense of local ownership and the prospects of sustainability.

Message for Rio: In a world of tight budgets and shrinking resources for development support, local initiatives offer a way to achieve significant development gains at lower cost.

FROM RIO TO RIO: 20 YEARS OF LESSONS IN SUSTAINABLE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

This section summarizes key lessons in local development gleaned from two decades of community-level experience. These observations inform the theory, structure, and practice of UNDP's engagement at the local level to help communities find solutions that integrate social, environmental, and economic benefits.

Local Organizations Play a Central Role

Local sustainable development cannot succeed without being rooted in the perspectives, demands, capacities, and actions of local actors.

Experience shows that effective local development initiatives are grounded in the actions of local organizations—groups whose activities are directed and carried out by members who live in the affected community. This includes a wide range of community-based organizations such as resource user groups, self-help groups, women's groups, and local cooperatives, as well as local NGOs, producer associations, unions, educational groups and other service organizations. Such local groups are in the best position to express local demand, create local ownership of project planning and execution, resolve disputes that arise, and inspire continued participation in the work.

Strengths and weaknesses of local groups

Local organizations have several strengths that make them well-suited to drive local action:

- They are embedded in the local culture and understand local livelihoods, and are thus in a good position to interpret and focus local demand.
- They function face-to-face, with bonds of trust and shared values among members, allowing them to catalyze collective action.
- They are conversant with local norms and informed by customary institutions, and are thus able to legitimize and enforce through social pressure the rules the group has adopted.
- They create a route for typically marginalized groups such as the poor, women, and indigenous peoples to organize and participate in group action and enterprise.

Local organizations also have weaknesses that can impede their effectiveness:

- They may lack essential technical, business, and communication skills necessary to carry out their plans and communicate their success.
- They are often short of funds, limiting the range of their activities.

- They are typically isolated and marginalized from the sources of political and economic power.
- Recognizing and building on the strengths of local organizations and helping them to address their weaknesses is necessary for effective community-driven development.

Rebalancing the local development equation

Focusing on the central role of local organizations does not mean that they should be expected to undertake local action without any assistance. Successful community-based initiatives require the active participation and support from all levels of government, as well as from national and international NGOs, donors, and other partners. But establishing a local organization focus can have a profound effect on how local development is perceived both by communities and by governments. By allowing civil society organizations to assume the leadership role, it reverses the government-centric model of development, where local groups are primarily beneficiaries. In its place, a new development equation emerges: local groups provide the initiative, innovation, and direction; governments provide the enabling conditions, mainstream local concerns into national policies, and encourage the scaling up of local successes.

Environmental Management is a Powerful Platform for Rural Development and Local Empowerment

Community-based management of local ecosystems is a good medium for addressing all three strands of sustainable development.

The use and management of natural resources is woven into the cultural and economic fabric of most rural households in developing nations. Local ecosystems are tied directly to livelihoods, cultural self-identity, and household well-being. This makes the management of ecosystems an effective substrate for sustainable development in all three of its dimensions—economic, social, and environmental.

Expanding local economic potential

There is a robust relationship between the health of ecosystems and the economic opportunities of rural communities. Increasing the productivity and resiliency of local ecosystems through better management is a first step toward increasing their economic potential. But other steps are important too: innovation in products and production systems, use of new harvest and processing technologies, better marketing, and the expansion of market access. New management skills and business capacities gained through ecosystem-based initiatives can also pave the way to job opportunities outside of traditional nature-based livelihoods, expanding local economic options further, and increasing community adaptive capacities.

Providing a space for social development

Community-based ecosystem management provides an excellent platform for inclusive social interaction and the maturation of local groups. Case experience shows that the process of working together to achieve mutually agreed goals builds social capital within the group. In addition, the chance to engage around an issue of common concern in a new group setting can give community members an opportunity to take on new roles and to partici-

pate and communicate in new ways. This increase in the social capacity of the group can sometimes enable communities to tackle new challenges above and beyond the scope of the initial project.

Conservation as a way to protect assets, reduce risks, and increase resilience

The emergence of environmental threats such as climate change and the rapid decline in biodiversity and the health of ecosystems represent a significant threat to rural economies and cultures. Community-based ecosystem management meets this challenge head-on. For most of these initiatives, conservation is not pursued as an end in itself, but as a way of achieving a combination of development goals, including protecting valuable economic and cultural assets and reducing environmental risks, such as from weather extremes related to climate change. This emphasis enables communities to value ecosystem assets for their range of contributions to local well-being and to see sustainable practices as consonant with their economic and social development goals.

Good Governance is Critical

Ownership of local development by community members is built on participation and inclusion; sustained interest and involvement is built on equitable benefits sharing.

Governance of a community-based initiative is perhaps the single biggest factor determining its ultimate success or failure. This includes how decisions are made within the group, who is included in the decisions, and how group processes of consultation, planning, enforcement, and dispute resolution are conducted. It also includes how benefits and costs of the group's activities are apportioned among group members. Governance that is participatory, inclusive, accountable, and transparent helps to foster collective action by the group and to engender trust in the group's decisions.

The centrality of participation

Participation in the planning of local action, the visualization of benefits and costs, the negotiation of commitments and rules, and the resolution of disputes is the central pillar of community-based development. At its root, participation underpins the process of creating the "community" at the center of the initiative. To inspire and maintain collective action, group members must feel their voice is heard and their concerns addressed.

Participation is also important to the initiative's process of growth and maturation. Many social benefits spring from the process of participation itself, including greater self-confidence and increased social status. Initiative members who might not have interacted with each other have a chance to do so in a supportive environment that builds trust and fosters social cohesion. It also builds the community's democratic culture.

Inclusiveness and equity broaden and solidify the community base

Inclusiveness is necessary to broaden the reach and effectiveness of community-based ecosystem management and bring marginalized groups into the cycle of participation and action. Inclusiveness involves not only widening the membership of the group undertaking the community initiative, but also accommodating different styles of communication and

decision-making, so that all group members feel that they can fully participate. Equity in the distribution of benefits and costs of community action is a key factor in maintaining group cohesiveness and insuring its sustainability over time.

Flexibility of institutional design

The institutional structure of local groups—that is, how the decision-making body is constructed, and how it conducts itself and holds leaders accountable—spans a wide range, reflecting differences in membership, culture, and the mission of the group. Many different models can work. Some have a strong basis in customary institutions such as tribal leadership; others can be quite untraditional, such as in women-led organizations or cooperatives. Substantive participation of group members in important group decisions is the characteristic that these different models share. Most community-based initiatives involve some sort of joint decision-making body such as a general assembly through which members are involved in major decisions and plans. However, use of accountability mechanisms (like elections), transparency, and other aspects of democratic governance varies considerably among groups.

Decentralization and devolution are necessary for local ecosystem governance

Good governance at the level of community-based initiatives must be supported at the national level. Empowering local organizations to drive development requires devolution of ecosystem management authority to the local level. While states have generally accepted the idea of decentralization in theory, they have often been reluctant to devolve sufficient management, regulatory, and budgetary authority to fully enable community-driven development, particularly in the areas of natural resource use and land management. Insufficient devolution to local institutions can translate to an obstacle to local action. On the other hand, devolution does not mean abandonment of communities to fend for themselves. Good governance requires a strong link between local ecosystem management and national planning and policymaking, including mechanisms for consultation with and participation of local groups in these national processes.

Community-Based Action Delivers the MDGs

Local ecosystem-based initiatives are a potent delivery system for the entire suite of Millennium Development goals

The benefits that come from community-based ecosystem management are not just environmental, but economic, social, and cultural as well. These benefits arise together, are mutually supportive, and represent the whole range of development aspirations embodied in the Millennium Development Goals. In essence, local ecosystem-based initiatives are an effective way to “localize” the MDGs and accelerate their achievement.

Delivering an integrated package of benefits

Documented benefits of local ecosystem-based initiatives are fully aligned with the MDGs and include:

- reductions in poverty associated with higher income and more economic opportunities (MDG-1);
- better nutrition and food security associated with improvements in agricultural yields and marketing (MDG-1);

- improvements in education and health care infrastructure as community funds are invested in new schools and clinics (MDG 2 and 4);
- higher literacy rates as funds for school fees become available and school access improves (MDG 2);
- the empowerment of women and attention to women’s health and reproductive needs through the establishment of women-led groups and improvements in local health care (MDG 3 and 5);
- improvements in local ecosystem health and conservation of biological diversity, associated with the use of sustainable harvest and land use practices and the development of an environmental ethic based on local experience (MDG 7);
- creation of dynamic partnerships with service organizations, donors, research institutes, private sector companies, and local and state governments (MDG 8).

In addition, the communal nature of the work done in these initiatives makes them a good vehicle for delivering social and health messages around such issues as HIV/AIDS and gender (MDG 6 and 3), as well as fostering environmental awareness and experience with sustainable local livelihoods (MDG 7).

Targeting marginalized groups

Community-based initiatives can be particularly empowering to traditionally excluded groups such as women and indigenous communities. In fact, they have proven to be a reliable way to deliver services to these hard-to-target groups—an important factor in their ability to accelerate MDG delivery.

Scaling Brings Landscape-Level Transformations

Scaling up of local successes is necessary for local action to reach its potential as a contributor to national development and rural resilience

Case studies of community-based initiatives offer compelling evidence that local sustainable development solutions can be “scaled up”—expanded in scope and reach—and “scaled out”—successfully replicated in another setting. Demonstrable success in one locale can have a catalytic effect, spurring its adoption by neighboring groups or in other contexts. This finding is critical in arguing against the idea that local solutions remain strictly a local matter.

Scaling effects can transform landscapes

In fact, quite the opposite is true. Scaling can confer development benefits far beyond the original locality and community group. These scaling effects are not confined to a linear increase in the number of people served by an initiative or the amount of benefits produced. They also include additional environmental, social, and economic benefits that accrue at the landscape and national levels. For example, scaling up improved wildlife management in Namibia’s 50 community conservancies has allowed wildlife populations to rebound over a large scale, helping to restore wildlife migrations, and providing the basis for a significant tourist industry in a region once entirely dependent on livestock and low-margin agriculture. The number of community conservancies grew from 4 in 1998 to 50 today as word of the

economic and social benefits spread, and now cover 14 percent of the nation's territory. Such scaling effects show how local solutions, when aggregated to the national level, could become the basis for achieving national poverty reduction and development goals, as well as meeting international environmental targets through such programs as REDD+.

Encouraging the scaling process

Scaling can proceed organically. Communities with successful models of sustainable enterprise and community building have often proven to be their own best advocates, acting as teachers, advisors, and mentors to other communities with similar challenges. However, governments, NGOs, donors, and other development partners can accelerate the scaling process by delivering targeted capacity building and support services to local groups, providing adequate finance, and enacting policies that remove barriers to local enterprise and empower local action.

An Enabling Environment Can Help

The right policies, support, finances, and partnerships can help release the potential of local action.

Local actors are the ones who must drive local action, providing its impetus, organization, and labor. Even in isolation, local groups have shown they can accomplish much. But outside actors have a crucial part to play as well by providing the enabling conditions for local success. This consists of a policy environment that empowers local actors with rights and access and removes regulatory obstacles, finance that catalyzes their local investment in sustainable management and enterprise and encourages innovation, capacity and support services that build the skill sets of local organizations and provide essential backstopping, and partnerships and networks that link local efforts to the larger economy and facilitate communication and knowledge sharing.

Resource rights and organizational rights

Secure and enforceable land and natural resource rights provide the basic economic rationale for investing in sound ecosystem management and sustainable local enterprise. Indeed, research confirms the importance of secure tenure to the success of community-based ecosystem management, and the value that local people place on it as a social organizing principle and cultural touchstone. Lack of secure tenure remains a significant barrier to local development. Also crucial to local action is the right of local groups to organize and act freely without undue interference. Such organizational rights provide local community-based groups the legal space to engage in joint activities and enterprises. Organizational rights derive from the basic right of association, which underlies the ability of civil society groups to conceive and carry out a local agenda.

Appropriate finance

Adequate and appropriate finance and access to financial services is a key requirement for initiating and sustaining local initiatives. The experience with the GEF Small Grants Programme shows that funding that is responsive and appropriately sized and timed can have a large effect on the success of local efforts and on the magnitude of the benefits they

generate. The SGP experience also demonstrates that a decentralized delivery mechanism for funds is well-suited to community-based initiatives, increasing the responsiveness and timeliness of grants, encouraging innovation as well as activities to help local institutions mature, and demonstrating that accountability at the local level is possible.

Market access

Accessing and expanding the markets for local ecosystem-based enterprises is vital to building the local green economy and turning the ecosystem assets at the disposal of local groups into income opportunities. A variety of routes to greater market access have proven successful, from new communication and transport technologies, to better business planning and market research, to private sector partnerships that facilitate organic certification and other strategies to distinguish or add value to local products.

Capacity building and support services

In many respects, capacity is empowerment. The capacities required for successful local development are not just technical and business capacities, but social and institutional capacities as well. Experience shows that effective capacity development is interactive, hands-on, and long-term, rather than one-off. Mentorships, internships, peer-to-peer exchanges, and other opportunities for active learning have a proven record. Support services, from legal and technical advice to a variety of business and financial services, are necessary to facilitate local action, especially in the beginning when the capacities of local groups have not been fully developed. Governments, NGOs, universities and research institutes, development agencies, and private sector companies all have unique strengths and proven track records as service deliverers.

Supportive tax and regulatory regimes

The success of local ecosystem management efforts and the enterprises associated with them are often highly dependent on resource licensing requirements, harvest and sales regulations, and local and national tax structures. Unfortunately, these are usually designed with large producers in mind and often comprise a significant obstacle to the commercial success of small local enterprises. Reframing and recalibrating these requirements so that they do not penalize small rural producers is necessary if local initiatives are to prosper.

Partnerships and networks

Partnerships have been a vital factor in local successes, allowing local groups to broaden their access to markets, to necessary technical and business skills, to new sources of finance, and to political support. Case histories of community-based initiatives show that it is possible for local groups to form viable partnerships with outside organizations without surrendering their autonomy or control of the local development agenda. Local experience also shows that successful groups often participate in many different partnerships at once, allowing them to take advantage of different partner strengths and preventing overreliance on any single partner. Networks and associations are also vital adjuncts to local success. Joining producer associations, knowledge networks, and larger federations can magnify and extend collective action, help local groups mitigate their isolation and capacity deficits, and act as a platform for learning and knowledge exchange.

SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Supporting community-based initiatives for sustainable development is right for our times and appropriate to the development challenges we face. A strengthened commitment to facilitating and scaling up local action would be a fitting outcome to the Rio deliberations. But what does this mean? Below we provide a basic agenda—outlined in general terms—for action on the part of governments, donors, NGOs, the private sector, and other development partners to provide an enabling environment for local action and to frame a commitment to encouraging and learning from local solutions. It is not intended to be exhaustive, but indicative of a consensus still emerging on how best to empower community-level action.

Provide the Enabling Conditions for Local Action

1. Empower local organizations

As the prime movers in local development, local organizations need the freedom to organize, take action, and present themselves as legitimate in the eyes of the state. Governments can sanction and support the variety of local organizations that drive local development—from NGOs and CBOs, to unions, and cooperatives, and commercial associations—by legitimizing them in law, providing them the legal space to function without unduly restricting their membership, funding or operations.

2. Confer resource rights and access

Strengthening the land and resource tenure security of local people is perhaps the single most important thing that governments can do to promote local ecosystem-based initiatives. This includes legitimizing customary tenure arrangements and strengthening and clarifying co-management arrangements with communities whose activities involve state forest, fishery, or grassland resources.

3. Expand local development finance

Providing adequate and appropriate finance to support and scale up community-based initiatives will require tapping the range of existing funding options, including traditional grants from development agencies and NGOs, government programs for rural development, and microfinance, as well as making use of new funding sources such as REDD+. No matter what the source, delivering these funds efficiently and in the right amounts is equally essential to local action. The GEF Small Grants Programme provides a model for local funds delivery that respects local knowledge and experience, and has a proven record of transparency, accountability, and efficacy. Expanded use of this modality is one obvious necessity if local initiatives are to be scaled up.

Support Development of a Community-Friendly Green Economy

1. *Expand and integrate local green markets into the broader economy*

Local green enterprises that spring from community-based ecosystem management face daunting odds in getting their products to market (or bringing their customers to them) and expanding their customer base. Expanded government, NGO, and private sector partnerships can help break this isolation and integrate local enterprises into the national and global economy. Promotion of cooperatives, producer associations, extension services, and similar groups that allow small enterprises to pool risk, gain access to appropriate technologies, and expand market access can also help.

2. *Provide supportive tax and regulatory regimes*

Reducing the aggregate burden of taxes and regulatory costs and simplifying permitting and planning procedures for local producers could go a long way to increasing the financial viability of these small enterprises and expanding the local green economy.

3. *Coordinate delivery of capacity building and support services*

The need for capacity building and support services is especially high in the initial phases of a community-based initiative. Establishment of national clearinghouses, registries, or consortia of service providers could greatly increase access to these services and coordinate their delivery to encourage scaling.

4. *Reduce resource conflicts between local communities and large-scale extractors*

Large-scale natural resource extraction in the form of timber, fishing, or mining concessions or agricultural conversion can undermine local efforts at ecosystem management and precipitate conflicts between communities and government planners. Adopting national land use policies that acknowledge the value of local ecosystem management and take this into consideration in the designation of natural resource concessions could help to reduce such conflicts.

Strengthen National Mechanisms to Support Community Action

1. *Encourage strategic frameworks for community action at landscape and national levels.*

The benefits of community initiatives can be amplified considerably when they contribute to broader national or landscape-level strategies for land-management and community development. Program strategies with clearly defined outcomes can guide project selection, and provide the basis for capacity building and the formulation of

supportive national policies. As part of a landscape-level strategy, community organizations can assess current trends in land and resource use and ecosystem health, weigh the impact of these trends on food security, disaster risk reduction, provision of water, and other benefits, and set priorities accordingly. The ownership generated by this participatory process, together with the increased knowledge of the relation between economic, social, and ecological processes in the landscape, can empower communities to act effectively.

2. *Strengthen national multi-actor partnerships for local development*

National-level partnerships, involving key civil society actors and others from a variety of sectors and institutions, can help coordinate and scale up community-based initiatives by developing strategic approaches to local action, analyzing the performance of local initiatives, and helping to secure funding to finance community-level engagement. These partnership platforms—such as the National Steering Committees of the GEF Small Grants Programme—provide a venue for strategic analysis, project selection, discussion of project and program evaluations, and adaptive management. Multi-actor partnership platforms such as these should be strengthened and fully empowered to support community initiatives.

3. *Ensure systematic dissemination of community-level experience to encourage scaling.*

Community initiatives provide concrete evidence of what works at the ground level. Properly designed and evaluated, these initiatives tell us much about the applicability of local methods and the effect of national policies, as well as the consequences of these for ecosystem health, social functioning, and income generation. It is essential that this knowledge be systematized, codified, and disseminated in accessible formats to community organizations, government and non-governmental institutions, and policy makers and opinion leaders. This is a critical input to national strategic plans and programs to encourage the scaling of local-level successes.

Embrace New Sustainable Development Metrics

1. *Catalyze development of appropriate metrics and indicators*

The traditional focus on GDP and income as measures of progress misses many of the integrated benefits that community-based initiatives produce. New metrics are needed that go beyond these to better reflect the importance of ecosystems and natural capital, as well as social well-being. Better measures of social benefits like empowerment and group cohesion, as well as the multifaceted benefit of resilience, are particularly needed.

2. *Develop metrics in consultation with local users*

Ideally, development of new community-relevant metrics should involve a collaboration between appropriate research institutions and the local groups who will be applying these measures and using the results to assess their activities.

Commit to Local Involvement in Constructing the Post-MDG Framework

The Millennium Development Goals have provided an important marker and focal point for assessing local development. Assessment of MDG progress has shown both the great need for localizing development efforts at the community level and also demonstrated how effective local ecosystem-based initiatives have been in delivering development at this level. Now, as we construct a framework for our international development aspirations in the post-MDG period after 2015, we must acknowledge the central role of community-based organizations in delivering sustainable development solutions. This should prompt a deep commitment to meaningful dialogue with communities on their priorities for local development going forward. If a new slate of Sustainable Development Goals is to be relevant to community-level outcomes, local people must have a voice in their construction, and especially in developing and applying the indicators used to assess progress toward these goals.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

These findings have been distilled from a number of supporting documents available on-line, including an extensive archive of case material demonstrating sustainable development successes and challenges in communities on every continent.

Analytical Reports

These reports can be found on-line at:

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/environment-energy/>

1. *20 Years: Community Action for the Environment*, GEF Small Grants Programme, UNDP, 2012.
2. *The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize*, Equator Initiative, UNDP, 2012.
3. *Enabling Local Success: A Primer on Mainstreaming Local Ecosystem-Based Solutions to Poverty-Environment Challenges*, UNDP-UNEP Poverty Environment Initiative, 2011.
4. *Triple Wins for Sustainable Development*, UNDP, 2012.
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6. *Ecosystems, Climate Change and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): Scaling Up Local Solutions, A Framework for Action*, UNDP/World Resources Institute, 2010.
7. *Community Based Adaptation to Climate Change*, UNDP/GEF Small Grants Programme, UNV, 2010.
8. *World Resources 2008: Roots of Resilience—Growing the Wealth of the Poor*, UNDP, UNEP, World Bank, World Resources Institute, 2008.
9. *Supporting the Role of Local Organisations in Sustainable Development*, International Institute for Environment and Development, 2008.
10. *UNDP Community Water Initiative: Fostering Water Security*, UNDP/GEF Small Grants Programme, 2010.

Web Resources

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home.html>

The GEF Small Grants Programme: <http://sgp.undp.org/>

The Equator Initiative: <http://www.equatorinitiative.org/>



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