SUSTAINING COMMUNITY ACTION
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WHAT IS THE VSP TOOL?

The VSP Tool is a diagnostic resource that can be used to help your community assess, plan and implement a sustainable approach to community action. It can help you to determine whether the issues you are concerned about are sufficiently meaningful to members of your community that they will be willing to devote their time and energy to them over the long term. It can help you to identify and maintain the resources and relationships that have been found to support sustainable community level action.

The VSP Tool is not a recipe book. It does not provide step-by-step directions of what to do. Instead it guides you on how to build a sustainable approach that will work for your community. It offers key principles to consider, important lessons learned from research on sustained community efforts, and poses a series of questions that will help you to facilitate a sustained initiative in your community. Although communities may take different paths to developing a sustainable approach to community action, our research on sustainability showed time and again that three consistent themes have been linked to developing sustainable initiatives. Whether in the crime prevention area or in other community-based activities, we discovered that communities that paid attention to Values, Structures and Processes (VSP) were more likely to develop sustainable community action. Moreover, while successful communities dealt with these factors in their own unique ways – based on who was involved, their past experiences and the resources that were available – each reported that these factors were the foundation of their sustainable community initiatives.
**HOW CAN MY COMMUNITY USE THE VSP TOOL?**

The VSP Tool is versatile since it can be used in different ways and at various points in the community development and community action process. For example, it can be used to:

- stimulate and shape discussions with others in your community as you talk about common concerns and assess what needs to be done.
- identify the most appropriate ways for your community to organize itself to undertake collective action.
- ensure that the processes that are put in place in your community are going to help you achieve your vision.

The VSP Tool can also serve as a “touchstone” throughout your initiative, to help you assess whether you are on track, or whether you need to make adjustments to be more responsive to your community’s needs.

The VSP Tool is one of several tools in the Sustainability Tool Kit produced by the Centre for Initiatives on Children Youth and Community. It can help your community to focus its efforts at many different points in the community action cycle. The diagram below presents a basic model for community action. It is essentially a problem solving model that resonates with a sustainable approach because it is based on a dynamic, iterative process and evidence-based decision making. The discussion that follows shows how the VSP Tool can be used at each stage in the model to inform your community efforts. Specific Worksheets are included below to help you work through key questions and to identify the tasks that need to be done to successfully move through each stage of the model.

“Sustainable community activity begins with local groups and organizations identifying needs, problems and solutions that are meaningful to them.”

*A Portrait of Sustainable Crime Prevention in Selected Canadian Communities – Highlights of the Study (2004)*
A BASIC MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY ACTION

Stage 1: Identify Concerns and Decide to Act

Stage 2: Develop Your Plan

Stage 3: Implement Your Plan

Stage 4: Evaluate, Adjust and Revisit Core Values

Model for Sustainable Community Action
As we noted above, Communities often come together as a result of a common issue or concern. Whatever issue or concern you focus on, however, several important things happen during Stage 1 in the community action process after community members come together. In most cases, these are related to the VALUES dimension highlighted in the VSP Tool.

Stage 1: Identify Concerns and Decide to Act

For many communities, the foundation of sustainable community action is working on an issue that reflects a common concern in the community. As simple as this sounds, many initiatives disappear soon after they are started due to a lack of genuine commitment among community members and the lack of ongoing community support.

In many communities, people come together over a particular issue or concern. Quite often this involves the health, safety and well being of their children. Once people come together over a particular issue, discussions often lead them to consider other issues or their broader circumstances. In this process, specific concerns are often translated into more general community-wide initiatives. Taking the step from having a concern, to mobilizing community resources to do something about it, however, is quite complicated. Those involved in many of the successful community initiatives that we studied devoted a great deal of time at the outset trying to determine whether the problem or concern they had identified was sufficiently meaningful to other community members that they would be willing to devote their time, energy and resources to it over the long term.

We learned about various ways that a community group can try to figure out whether others in the community share their concerns and if these are sufficiently meaningful for them to get involved. Some community groups held a meeting of key stakeholders and important community leaders where they discussed their concerns. They used these discussions to determine what the likelihood was of getting broader community support.
for their issue. Others called a community meeting in which the issue was discussed in an open forum and community members were asked if they would be willing to work on collective solutions.

Once a community group determines that it has identified an issue or concern that is meaningful to the local community and for which there is community support, subsequent meetings can be held to develop an understanding of community values. Successful communities used various strategies during these kinds of sessions to build a shared community vision. This emphasis on community values reinforces the idea of local ownership which further solidifies the commitment of community members to the initiative. Caution should be exercised, however, since developing a shared community vision does not mean imposing a consensus of values or beliefs. Instead, it means acknowledging existing differences and being respectful of them while searching for common ground and a way of working together for a common purpose.

Talking about values in such a frank and open way was crucial to the success and sustainability of the community initiatives we studied. Companies and organizations in both the public and private sectors learned this valuable lesson some time ago. Today, many organizations devote a considerable amount of time, energy and resources to developing their mission and vision statements. These value statements serve as important anchors for these organizations. They clearly identify who they are and what they stand for. They also make clear what their goals are and how they plan to achieve them. Those involved in community initiatives can learn from these examples and make a focus on values a central feature of their community initiatives.
Here are some of the key insights from the VALUES part of the VSP Tool that you might want to consider if you are at Stage 1 in the community action model.

LOCAL MEANING

Sustainable community activity begins with local groups and organizations identifying needs, problems and solutions that are meaningful for them.

Questions to consider:
1. What is the issue? Who is affected? Who is expressing concern?
2. How do you know if you have identified an issue that is meaningful to the local community?
3. What do you want to sustain?
4. Why?

Potential Challenges:
1. If the issue is not meaningful to the local community, it will not receive their support.
2. Some issues refer to specific problems that can be resolved in a given time frame and do not need to be sustained.
LOCAL CONNECTION

Sustainable activity connects individuals and groups who share a concern about a specific problem. It is through these connections that individual or private concerns become community-wide, public issues.

Questions to consider:
1. Who is involved? Who is not involved at the moment but should be?

2. Who else should you reach out to at the beginning stages of your initiative?

3. Who might you reach out to at a later date?

4. How will you get the support of key stakeholders including those most directly involved as well as community leaders? Will they be willing to devote time, energy and resources to the initiative?

Potential Challenges:
1. You need a small group of committed community members to get things going but others in the community may see this as a clique and they may refuse to join later or block your efforts.

2. If you have too large a group, it is difficult to get real commitment and buy in. Your sessions become “just another meeting” for them to attend.

3. Community action is often very political, especially if it means a potential claim on scarce community resources. Care should be taken to communicate your intentions early in the process.

4. Others working on related issues in the community may be threatened by the appearance of a new initiative.
LOCAL OWNERSHIP

Sustainable approaches are shared: the community, rather than a single individual, owns the problem(s) – and its solution(s).

Questions to consider:

1. Where does the issue or concern come from? Was it identified by community members or did someone from “outside” the community raise the concern?

2. Does it focus on the entire community or does it reflect the immediate interests and concerns of only a few community members?

3. Who is willing to do something about it?

Potential Challenges:

1. People don’t like something imposed on them. If an idea is introduced, those involved have to have the time to decide if it is something that they want to “own”.

2. There is often suspicion that “outsiders” are trying to “ram something down our throats.” This can have very negative consequences.

3. Identifying problems is often threatening. People don’t like change even if it means making things better. Acknowledging that they have a problem is often difficult for people. They may think that it will reflect badly on them.
COMMUNITY VISION:

Sustaining community activity means developing and retaining a focus on the bigger picture – a vision of where the community is going – while simultaneously working step by step on projects and specific issues.

Questions to consider:
1. What is your community's vision?
2. Have those most directly involved in the initiative discussed the vision they have for their community – that is, the ideal state they would like to see develop as a result of their activities?
3. How much support is there for this vision?
4. Are there competing visions or points of view and have these been addressed?
5. How will this vision be shared with the rest of the community and will they get a chance to have their input?

Potential Challenges:
1. People are typically concerned with an immediate problem or issue and don't usually think in terms of a broader community vision.
2. The vision that is developed may not be clear right away.
3. It takes time and effort to develop a common vision. It may be difficult to devote time to developing a community vision when people want to move quickly to an action stage.
4. There may be competing or even conflicting values in a community making it difficult to develop a common vision and how to achieve it. Patience, skill and care are required in the search for common ground and the accommodation of different points of view.

Values and community visions are crucial during Stage 1 of the community action model. However, values and community visions have to be talked about and revisited throughout an initiative so that community members can be reminded of why they are there, what they are trying to sustain and why this is important to the community.
STAGE 1 STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER:

1. CONSULT WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- **Talk to the people most directly affected.** Talk to others in the community to answer the questions about the Values component of the VSP Tool outlined above. These can be individual meetings or meetings with small groups of community members to gauge their potential response to the initiative.

2. ENGAGE COMMUNITY MEMBERS: COMMUNITY EVENTS/ FORUMS/WORKSHOPS AND OTHER COMMUNITY MEETINGS

- **Host a community event.** After you have consulted with community members and found sufficient support to take the next step, you may want to hold a community event of some kind such as a Family Fair to publicize your initiative, raise awareness of it and gain additional support.

- **Hold a community meeting.** Some communities have moved quickly to large, community-wide town hall-type meetings to put their concerns before the broader community.

- **Consult with different segments of the community.** Some communities have done this in a step by step process in which smaller meetings were held with different groups in the community (youth, seniors).

- **Raise awareness of your issue.** Some communities have brought in a high profile speaker to make people aware that an issue exists and to gain the initial support of community members.
3. GATHER EVIDENCE TO HELP DEFINE THE ISSUES AND PLAN YOUR STRATEGY: COMMUNITY SURVEYS, FOCUS GROUPS, AUDITS, AND ASSESSMENTS:

- **Get informed!** When a community issue is identified, people want to know something about the nature and extent of the problem before they decide whether it warrants further attention. Some communities have done surveys, focus groups, audits, assessments or used other research methods to gather the necessary information. Some communities have sought help with this from universities, colleges, police, social service and health agencies, the media, and businesses in their communities.

- **Learn from others.** People are also interested in what is already going on in their communities and who else is working on these issues that they could turn to for help and support. Some communities have undertaken an environmental scan in order to identify what is already happening and who is involved. This often leads to the development of a Service Directory or Inventory which is a useful tool for further community action.

- **Use the information to inform what you do!** The information gathered at this stage is crucial for the next steps in the community development cycle. It can inform the discussions that occur when a community plan is developed.

The information presented above is summarized in the: **VSP V IS FOR VALUES WORKSHEET.** It can help you assess important community Values questions during **Stage 1** of the community action model. Return to the Values questions and this Worksheet periodically during your initiative to ensure that you are directing appropriate attention and resources to the Values that represent the foundation of sustainable community initiatives.
# The V Is For Values! Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Tasks (What Will Be Done?)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Who is involved?</td>
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<td>2. Who else should we reach out to?</td>
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<td>3. Who might we reach out to later?</td>
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<td>4. How will we get the support of key stakeholders?</td>
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STAGE 2: DEVELOP YOUR PLAN

After community members have come together, identified a common concern and decided to do something about it, many want to move quickly to the action stage. As we stressed above, much important work regarding values and community visions should be started in Stage 1. For most communities, this represents an ongoing process that carries on throughout a community initiative. However, communities that have attended to the basic questions identified in the Values part of the VSP Tool can move to Stage 2 while they simultaneously continue to work on Values strategies such as consultations or gathering information.

In Stage 2, communities begin to put in place the types of structures they will need to develop and implement a sustainable community plan. Developing your community plan can be made easier through the use of various planning tools and exercises that are consistent with the Basic Model of Community Action described above. These include using various strategic planning strategies and visioning exercises to identify and prioritize short, medium and long-term goals. It could also include developing a logic model or road map that reflects the community members’ understanding of what they want to accomplish and how specific activities will help them to do this.

The VSP Tool provides an important addition to Stage 2 of the community action model. It highlights important information and identifies various strategies that can help communities build the types of structures that are required for sustainable community action.
Successful communities build structures that are best suited to their community context and culture, and that can guide their efforts in sustainable ways. Structures are based on ongoing social relationships. They represent the roles and related responsibilities we create to get things done. In most organizations, the structures are visible in the offices and titles people occupy. They are created to help organize collective action by distributing certain responsibilities to those involved. In a community initiative, the most immediate structures that need to be addressed include the ways that community groups organize themselves to undertake collective community action. We usually refer to these as organizational structures and they bring to mind the typical corporate organizational chart that looks like a pyramid. It has the president, chief executive officer or other person in charge at the top, with various subordinates listed below according to their ranks, responsibilities and authority. This traditional organizational structure is often adapted by community groups. Task groups or sub-committees are then created to deal with specific issues with a person identified as the Chair of each sub-committee.

While we are all familiar with organizational structures, their importance in community initiatives is often taken for granted. For example, the organizational structure that is created by a community group sends a powerful message to others in the community including information about how power, decision-making and accountability will be handled. Organizational structures and their related roles also tell people who is involved and what they are trying to accomplish. In the next section on processes, we discuss how the organizational structure is inherently linked with what actually happens when people get together to do something. Decisions about who is chosen as Chairperson, how this selection took place, who was involved and who can be involved, all speak to crucial issues of governance and legitimacy in community initiatives.

We know that communities, like other social entities, are political spaces. The nature of the organizational structure a community group develops sends an important political message to the rest of the community about what is going on and who is involved. The appearance of a “new” community group on the scene can be perceived as a threat by some or with caution by others especially if this
involves a potential for competition over scarce community resources such as volunteers, a place to meet, finances, etc. The organizational structure is often scrutinized by others in the community to determine if there is an explicit or “hidden” agenda being promoted. They may decide to support or oppose you based on their assessment of what you are up to and how much support you have already been able to generate.

A second level of community organization is reflected in the types of structures that exist outside of the immediate community group that has come together to address an issue of common concern. In our research, we discovered that communities that successfully sustained their initiatives created a variety of connections with others that could support their efforts. In a real sense, they increased the likelihood of their own sustainability by establishing linkages to the existing institutional structures in their communities. These external structures consisted of both formal and informal relationships with other groups and organizations including government agencies. These structures were comprised of horizontal linkages – partnerships and connections established across the community as well as vertical linkages – partnerships and connections established with various levels of government. Structures in these cases refer to the established and ongoing relationships that link the local initiative to others working in the broader community and to the various levels of government that often have an interest in or jurisdiction over community services and interventions. These ongoing relationships can provide access to a wide range of resources including knowledge and ideas as well as financial and other support.

Establishing horizontal and vertical linkages sends a strong message to both those directly involved in a community initiative as well as those in the surrounding community. These structures lend legitimacy and credibility to a community's efforts and signal that something important is going on. The external contacts ensure that what goes on at the local level resonates with the values and beliefs of the wider community and that it is informed by current thinking on the topic. External contacts can bring up to date information to a community about what others in similar circumstances have tried and what has worked well.
Here are some of the key insights from the **STRUCTURES** part of the **VSP** Tool that you might want to consider if you are at **Stage 2** in the community action model.

**WORKING TOGETHER**

In all of the communities we studied, sustainability depended on people working together effectively. This required the development of appropriate organizational structures and ongoing – and often challenging – efforts to bring people together to work on common goals.

**Questions to consider:**

- What organizational structure, if any, is in place?
- How was this organizational structure developed?
- What message does your organizational structure send others about who you are and what you are trying to accomplish?
- What options are there for your organizational structure? Should you develop a traditional pyramid with a Chair and other officers or should you explore the possibilities of an alternative structure such as having an executive committee with each member of the executive chairing a sub-group?
- Does the organizational structure reflect the context you are working in and the culture of your community?

**Potential Challenges:**

- The organizational structure you developed may be seen as a “clique” that includes a group of friends and that is closed to others. This may discourage others from getting involved.
- The organizational structure sends a message that there is a hidden agenda at work. Others in the community may be suspicious or resistant to your efforts.
Leaders were crucial. Leaders were individuals – or in some situations, groups of individuals – who had a thorough knowledge of the community and its concerns, and were personally connected to the community. In every case, the effectiveness of these leaders was based on their commitment, their trust in others, and their ability to build alliances and partnerships.

Questions to consider:
• How can you develop the type of leadership your community needs to address this issue?

Potential Challenges:
• Strong leaders are vital but caution is required since others may be willing to step back and let a small group of committed leaders do all of the work.

• Community leaders often find themselves identified as key participants at many different community meetings because they are recognized as being committed to making their communities better places to live. Burn out of community volunteers is a real issue.
INVESTMENT IN CAPACITY

Communities have differing levels of capacity to address their concerns. Those that sustained their initiatives took steps to further develop their capacity. They did this by acquiring additional knowledge about the issue(s), by obtaining human resources to play key roles (e.g., a coordinator), and by securing the physical, social and financial capital they needed. It is important to assess and to build on existing capacity.

Questions to consider:
1. What are your community's assets?
2. What assets are required to meet your needs, address your problems, and implement your solutions?
3. How can you further build your capacity to meet your needs?
4. How can you ensure that capacity once developed is utilized and remains within the community?

Potential Challenges:
- Coordination and administration resources are vital. These need to be developed in a community. The risk is that ‘busy’ people will step forward to do these vital tasks “off the sides of their desks”, that is, in addition to their full-time work. This puts strain on those involved and may hinder community action.
- If capacity building is not addressed by those involved in the community initiative, it is left to others outside of the community to assume this responsibility on their own. This may cause a loss in local ownership and control of any community initiative.
LINKAGES

Having linkages and relationships within and beyond the community is an important element of sustainability. Horizontal linkages include partnerships and connections within the community. Vertical linkages to government officials and agencies can provide important resources and support for action. These relationships can also help to support community action by connecting the community to resources such as funding support, knowledge, and a link to wider values and norms (e.g., social justice and human rights).

HORIZONTAL LINKAGES

Effective working relationships are at the core of sustainable initiatives. Relationships are not easy to establish or sustain. Sustainable activities are built on relationships within the community that are based on trust, mutual respect, and a shared interest in and commitment to the wellbeing of the community.

Questions to consider:

- With whom do you need to develop working relationships to address your issues?
- What types of working relationships are best suited to your community’s needs?
- How can you build and sustain the types of working relationships that will meet your community’s needs?

Potential Challenges:

- People are suspicious of newcomers including new community organizations. They may perceive you as a threat or as being in competition for scarce resources.
- The term ‘partnership’ is in common use these days, however, it often means different things to different people. Expectations about partnerships should be clearly stated to avoid misunderstandings or disappointments.
VERTICAL LINKAGES

Connections with others outside the community provide resources such as funding support, knowledge, and a link to wider values and norms (e.g. social justice and human rights).

Questions to consider:

• How can you develop linkages with others outside the community?

• What are the consequences of accepting external funding for the community's priorities and activities?

Potential Challenges:

• It is very difficult to devote time and energy to developing outside connections when you are working hard on immediate challenges of community action. You run the risk of missing out on help and support that could be vital.

• Too much emphasis on external connections may make you vulnerable to external influences and pressure. You may find your priorities being shifted in response to these pressures and in particular, when applying for financial support.
RESOURCES

Sustainable approaches require a range of resources, including financial resources for infrastructure and to support coordination and communication as well as inkind resources such as volunteer labour and other donations, which both sustain activity and build community ownership.

A Word on Project Funding:
Project funding can be used strategically as part of a larger community initiative. It offers opportunities for early success which in turn, build commitment and momentum. Project funding alone, however, will not sustain activity; it must be viewed as one component in a larger community vision or initiative. While project funding may be necessary, it alone is not sufficient to ensure sustainability!

Questions to consider:
• What resources do you have in your community?
• How can resources be mobilized to assist your efforts?
• How will you generate and renew your resources?
• Is project funding needed, and if so, what type of project funding and for how long?

Potential Challenges:
• There is a tendency for people in community initiatives to feel that their efforts would be sustainable if only they had enough money. This is contrary to some of the basic elements of sustainable thinking which are based on a more holistic view and reflect a concern with broad community change.
• More financial resources may allow particular activities to be continued but they cannot increase community commitment to or ownership of a collective initiative.
STAGE 2: STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

1. LEADERSHIP:

• *Engage* existing and potential leaders from the community.

• *Identify* individuals in your community who can champion your cause.

• *Explore* leadership styles and structures best suited to your situation.

• *Provide opportunities* for leadership development, such as mentoring and training.

• *Provide opportunities* for coordinators to develop their skills.

• *Organize* leadership skills workshops.

2. CAPACITY:

• *Conduct* an Asset assessment and inventory.

• *Plan* community activities that can further build assets.

• *Ask* what the “residue” of a particular activity will be and how it will contribute to a sustainable approach in the long term.

• *Create* a Capacity Development Plan.

• *Develop* ‘train the trainer’ strategies to ensure that required skills can be developed and renewed within the community.
3. HORIZONTAL LINKAGES

- **Invest** in building relationships with key partners in the community.
- **Build** partnerships strategically. Think about with whom do you want to partner and how.
- **Look** within your community for sources of support such as existing institutions, agencies and businesses.

4. VERTICAL LINKAGES

- **Look** for sources of support outside your community that match your community's needs rather than matching your activities to meet funding program criteria.
- **Explore** Community Websites since they provide information on what other communities are doing.
- **Examine** what is available on Government Websites since they provide information and list funding programs/sources.
- **Consult** Private and Philanthropic Foundation Websites since they provide information and list funding programs/sources.
5. RESOURCES

• **Determine** what resources you have to work with.

• **Estimate** what resources you will need to be successful.

• **Consider** the type of financial support you need and when you need it.

• **Secure** whatever in-kind resources partners can contribute. Use donated in-kind resources to reduce costs and be more cost efficient.

• **Develop** strategies to recruit, train and maintain a volunteer base.

• **Organize** local fund raising activities.

• **Develop** a financial plan.

• **Use** resources on the recruiting and training of volunteers.

• **Organize** Workshops on proposal writing for accessing funding.

• **Explore** existing fundraising tools for ideas and strategies.

• **Consider** the ideas outlined in social marketing tools as a way of promoting your initiative.
### S is for Structures! Worksheet

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2. How was this organizational structure developed?
3. What message does it send others about who we are and what we are trying to accomplish?
4. What options are there for our organizational structure?
5. Does the organizational structure reflect the context we are working in and the culture of our community?

**Leaders:**
1. How can we develop the type of leadership our community needs to address this issue?

**Investment In Capacity:**
1. What are our community’s assets?
2. What assets are required to meet our needs, address our problems, and implement our solutions?
3. How can we further build our capacity to meet our needs?
4. How can we ensure that capacity once developed is utilized and remains within the community?
### S is for Structures! Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Timelines</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Horizontal Linkages:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. With whom do we need to develop working relationships to address our issues?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. What types of working relationships are best suited to our community's needs?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. How can we build and sustain the types of working relationships that will meet our community's needs?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Vertical Linkages:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. How can we develop linkages with others outside the community?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. What are the consequences of accepting external funding for the community's priorities and activities?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resources:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. What resources do we have in our community?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. How can resources be mobilized to assist our efforts?</td>
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<td>3. How will we generate and renew our resources?</td>
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<td>4. Is project funding needed, and if so, what type of project funding and for how long?</td>
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STAGE 3: IMPLEMENT YOUR PLAN

Stage 3 is the action phase of your initiative. If you have successfully addressed the issues related to bringing the community together and developing a community plan, you have laid a solid foundation for positive change in your community. Our research suggests that as you proceed to the action stage of your initiative, you should pay particular attention to how things will get done. This is the essence of the P part of the VSP Tool.

The VSP Tool addresses a number of key issues that are relevant to Stage 3 of the community action model. These speak to issues related to how we do things when we work together. It places particular emphasis on ensuring that the processes we use when we work together reflect the types of values that are consistent with sustainable processes.

P IS FOR PROCESSES!

**ACTIONS THAT SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY INITIATIVES**

Processes are the ‘connective tissues’ that support ongoing social interaction. This social interaction forms the basis of the social structures we discussed above. The processes we create and adopt speak to how we act and interact with others. We learned from our research that sustainable community initiatives incorporated inclusive, non-hierarchical and diversity-sensitive ways of acting, particularly when this was related to planning and other decision-making activities. These types of processes are clearly consistent with the equity principle which stresses that people have a right to be heard and included in decision-making. Moreover, processes such as decision-making should be open and transparent, and respect well established democratic principles.
In many of the communities we studied, establishing appropriate processes for their initiatives meant devising appropriate methods for consulting with community members on an ongoing basis. Creating this kind of iterative process meant that they realized the importance of having people discuss key issues of concern and having input into community action on an ongoing basis. In this regard, communication processes were found to be crucial to support collective action. Keeping people informed, however, proved to be a significant challenge in many of the communities we studied. Some created newsletters to let people know what they were doing and how to get involved. Others called open community meetings on a regular basis. Still others called a series of meetings with members of the different constituencies in a community such as seniors and youth in order to provide a context in which people felt comfortable expressing their views. Thus, while a person might speak up in a small group made up of similar people, the same person would be intimidated by the idea of speaking at a large community meeting. Whatever the strategy, the communities that developed sustainable initiatives realized the importance of clear and open communications and devoted considerable resources to these processes.

Processes reflect the “way we do business.” In our experience, the more formalized and established processes we establish (we often refer to these as protocols) have a possibility of lasting long after the individuals who originally created them have moved on. When thinking about sustainability, processes represent the taken for granted way we do things and these tend to persist. If we create open, democratic, inclusive, and diversity sensitive processes, we will be acting in a way that is consistent with a sustainable approach and thereby increase the likelihood that our initiatives will be sustainable.
AN ITERATIVE PROCESS (IP)

Each community employed a dynamic and reflexive implementation process. They continually consulted, sought information, acted, assessed and retooled. They shared and fed back information with and to the community. In some communities, the process was informal (learn as you go); others followed a structure (e.g., community forums). Some used tools such as asset building, workshops, surveys, focus groups and action planning. All processes involved coordination and communication. All moved from a focus on an immediate problem, to a more holistic understanding of the issues in their community.

Questions to consider:

• How informal or formal should your process be?

• How are decisions made in your group? Do people have a chance to have their say?

• How will you solicit the views of the broader community on an ongoing basis? How will you encourage their participation in decision-making?

• What's working well? What's not working so well? What adjustments should be made to improve your process?

Potential Challenges:

• If processes are not open and democratic, people may feel excluded and that they have no way of being heard.

• If there are several groups working on various components of your strategy, it is difficult to keep them informed about what the others are doing. This can cause problems of distrust and secrecy to arise.

Here are some of the key insights from the PROCESSES part of the VSP Tool that you might want to consider if you are at Stage 3 in the community action model.
INCLUSIVE, NON-HIERARCHICAL AND DIVERSITY-SENSITIVE APPROACH

Community activity is more likely to be sustainable when it is premised on a non-hierarchical (bottom-up), integrated and diversity-sensitive approach. This contributes to the flexibility to respond to demands in the local context that emerge over time.

Questions to consider:

- How can you ensure your approach is inclusive?
- How will we ensure that the leadership in our group reflects the feelings of all involved and not only those most closely connected to the initiative?
- How will you ensure that the community initiative reflects the diversity that exists in your community?

Potential Challenges:

- Some groups and individuals in your community may simply not want to get involved, no matter how hard you try to reach out to them. How will you ensure that their concerns are addressed?
- There is often a tension between ‘insiders’ (those directly involved in ongoing activities) and ‘outsiders’ (other community members) in a community initiative. Care must be taken to ensure that this gap does not become negative and destructive.
COORDINATION

Sustainable action requires coordination and administration that is consistent and continuous. Coordinators in particular are crucial because they play a critical role in keeping people connected and things on track.

Questions to consider:
- What is the role of the coordinator in your initiative?
- Who will be responsible for coordinating your process?
- Where should the person who is coordinating be located?
- How much coordination time will they need?
- Will training/mentoring be provided for coordinators?

Potential Challenges:
- Some of the people involved in community initiatives move on for various personal reasons. In a community group, this often results in a loss of collective experience. This is especially crucial when a Coordinator has to be replaced.
- Locating a coordinator in the office of an existing community agency sends a strong message which can potentially lead to the initiative being too closely associated with the agency as opposed to the community.
COMMUNICATION

Having communication strategies that support collective actions is vital to the sustainability of your initiative.

Questions to consider:
- How will you let people know what you are doing, encourage their participation and support, and keep them informed in a timely way?
- How should you communicate and share information as you go?
- Who will be responsible for communications in your initiative?

Potential Challenges:
- The responsibility for calling meetings, sending out minutes, preparing newsletters or other forms of communication is very labour intensive and time consuming. It may take up a lot of your existing resources.
- Communications can be informal or formal. Care should be taken that what you communicate actually sends the message you intend. There are communication experts in most communities who could be approached for assistance.
**EARLY SUCCESS**

Early successes (e.g. a community clean-up, a family fun day) increase community awareness of an initiative and can help to stimulate community interest and involvement. Communities that begin with limited capacity can use early successes to build community confidence and momentum. Early successes provide a tangible demonstration that something positive is going to be done!

**Questions to consider:**

- What can your community do in the short term that will demonstrate your commitment, raise awareness and help build momentum?

- What action will demonstrate to others that you are serious about making a difference in your community?

**Potential Challenges:**

- Early success may raise expectations that have to be managed.

- What at first seems fairly simple to accomplish may actually require the involvement of many other service providers and a lot of ‘red tape’.

- Don’t promise what you can’t deliver since community members may become sceptical about what you can actually accomplish.
STAGE 3: STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

1. AN ITERATIVE PROCESS (IP)

- **Develop** ways of consulting that fit the community context.
- **Hold** ongoing consultations to identify and integrate views of participants and get feedback on what you are doing.
- **Use** a “community table” to have key partners interact on an ongoing basis.
- **Schedule** meetings at regular intervals to keep people connected.
- **Reflect** on what’s working well, and not so well and adjust accordingly.

2. INCLUSIVE, NON-HIERARCHICAL AND DIVERSITY-SENSITIVE APPROACH:

- **Identify** and engage a wide cross section of your community.
- **Seek** the involvement of those impacted and engage them in the decisionmaking process.
- **Ensure** that information is communicated widely so that it reaches key groups.
- **Develop** strategies to actively recruit members from diverse communities
3. COORDINATION

• **Assign** a coordinator and determine role and responsibilities.

• **Look** for opportunities and resources to provide training and mentoring to coordinators.

4. COMMUNICATION

• **Launch** an awareness/educational campaign to inform the community of who you are and what you are trying to do.

• **Use** newsletters and other information sharing techniques.

• **Seek** out experts who can help with communication.

5. EARLY SUCCESS

• **Organize** high profile community events such as a family fun day, youth focused activities or get high profile speakers to come to your community.

• **Resolve** small but visible issues — such as repairing street lights or cleaning up a local park.
### P is for Processes! Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Tasks (What Will Be Done?)</th>
<th>Responsibility (Who will do it?)</th>
<th>Timelines (By when?)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>An Iterative Process:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. How informal or formal should our process be?</td>
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<td>4. What's working well? Not so well? What adjustments should we make to improve our process?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Inclusive, Non-hierarchical and Diversitysensitive approach:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. How can we ensure our approach is inclusive?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. How will we ensure that the leadership represents our needs, aspirations and values?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. How will we ensure that community members are involved in decision making?</td>
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#### Coordination
1. What is the role of the coordinator in our initiative?
2. Who will be responsible for coordinating our process?
3. Where will they be located?
4. How much time will they need?
5. Will they be trained/mentored?

#### Communication
1. How will we let people know what we are doing, encourage their participation and support, and keep them informed in a timely way?
2. How can we best engage people in our community?
3. How should we consult, communicate and share information as we go?
### P is for Processes! Worksheet

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<td>1. What can our community do in the short term that will demonstrate our commitment, raise awareness and help build momentum?</td>
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STAGE 4: EVALUATE, ADJUST AND REVISIT CORE VALUES

Stage 4 in the action phase of your initiative is the time to reflect on what you have done and where you are going. While you have been consulting and gathering information from the outset, Stage 4 recommends that you take the time to do a more formal assessment of your initiative. One of the key features of sustainability is that you are sensitive to the impact of your actions. For sustainable community initiatives this means assessing your actions on an ongoing basis and making the required changes to keep you true to your values and vision. Whatever decisions you make in this regard should be based on a thoughtful consideration of evidence that you gather about what you are doing. There are many ways and methodologies that you can use to evaluate what you are doing in your initiative. Including evaluation planning during the early stages of your initiative will help you to anticipate both what information you will want during Stage 4 as well as how to collect this information. There are numerous resources you can consult on evaluations. You may want to seek the assistance of various members of your community including those working at Community Colleges, Universities, nongovernmental organizations or the private sector who have expertise in evaluation they are willing to share. This may present an opportunity to build important community capacity in this area.

Stage 4 requires you to look carefully at all of the parts of the VSP Tool, that is, the values, structures and processes you have put in place to support your sustainable community action. The VSP Tool addresses a number of the questions that might arise when you undertake an evaluation of your community initiative.
Here are some of the key insights from the VSP Tool that you might want to consider if you are at Stage 4 in the community action model.

**VALUES**

**Questions to consider:**
- How has your community vision informed the actions you have taken in the community?
- What type of evidence do you have that you are moving towards your vision?
- Have the values that informed your vision changed or remained the same? Is it time to revisit your community vision, and to reassess your goals and objectives?

**Potential Challenges:**
- Time is always a challenge for community development or change. People are impatient for improvement and may be premature and harsh in their judgments.
- Expectations have to match what is possible given the time and resources available.
- If the evidence suggests that a change is needed, this may threaten the position of some members of the community. Care should be exercised during these discussions to include the views and concerns of key stakeholders.
Questions to consider:

- What does the evidence tell you about how well your organizational structure has served you?
- Is it time to revisit the organizational structure and make changes?
- What have you learned about your horizontal and vertical connections?
- Have these connections helped or hindered your efforts?
- What changes should be considered based on the available evidence?

Potential Challenges:

- What seems to be a normal way of organizing at the outset may lead to various unintended consequences.
- A rift may develop between the “executive” and others working on the community initiative.
- Task groups may go off and do their ‘own thing’ which may be contrary to the common goals outlined in the community vision.
- Partnerships take time to develop. They cannot be created “overnight”.
Questions to consider:

• What evidence do you have that your processes are inclusive of the various groups in your community?

• How hard have you tried to reach out to these groups? What has been the result? How else might you proceed?

• What have you done to ensure that people can have some input into the decision making process?

• How aware are others in the community about your initiative?

• How well have your various strategies been at communicating who you are and what you are doing?

Potential Challenges:

• Due to the time lag between community meetings or other events and community action, many community initiatives lose their momentum.

• Momentum can also be lost when you take time to gather information or assess and evaluate what you are doing.

• The activities you undertake represent “one time” actions and they don’t become protocols or the taken for granted way you do business in your community.
NOTE: The VSP Tool raises important questions for communities at Stage 4 in the Community Action cycle. However, it should be used throughout the community initiative to ensure that sufficient attention is being paid to Values, Structures and Processes - important elements in the sustainability of your community initiative.