

Five Steps to Successful Community Engagement and Mobilization



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Sowing Futures is using Global Communities' community development model, PACE, to engage target communities in Brazil and to begin developing community-level capacity to (1) plan for the long-term, (2) identify community priorities, (3) design projects, (4) mobilize resource investments and (5) implement community development projects. Often questions arise such as, "How do you start," "How do you begin to engage communities," or "How do you get them to participate and begin to organize." Our experience in Sowing Futures offers five practical steps for successful community engagement and mobilization.

1. Start off with a transparent community selection process and share results

There are many options on how to go about selecting your target communities. Donor requirements may indicate specific selection criteria or prioritized geographic or socio-demographic sectors. The quality and availability of quantitative data such as average family income or school dropout rates will also drive selection criteria. As important as defining your community selection process may be, it is equally important that you are transparent and publicly share selection criteria and the results of the community selection process. Post the results of your community selection process online and share them with program stakeholders, including the communities that were not selected.

If public data does not exist or is unreliable, and if you have time or budget constraints for carrying out your own quantitative assessments, you can obtain data through focus groups or key informant interviews. We utilized key informant interviews with a diverse range of public-private actors to access which communities were perceived as the most vulnerable. Based on the interview results and processed data set, we selected the three communities with highest levels of vulnerability. You can see the results of the Sowing Futures community selection process here.

Global Communities is a global development organization committed to working in partnership with communities worldwide to bring about sustainable, impactful changes that improve the lives and livelihoods of the vulnerable. Please visit our website at www.globalcommunities.org for more information.



2. Map community priorities and identify community leaders through community assessments

Once we identified our target communities, we designed a simple questionnaire with the goal of identifying potential community leaders as well as what community members saw as their most pressing priorities. The questionnaire was applied through a house-to-house survey approach and carried out by our program staff. This is a great opportunity to inform community members about your upcoming program, its objectives and next steps. We found that when interviewed individually and anonymously, community members were more forthcoming about their needs and priorities, as well as their perceptions of who the “go-to” people were within the community. Properly framing questions is important. For example, we did not explicitly ask “Who are the community leaders,” but rather, “Who does the community member turn to when they need help or when there is a community issue that must be resolved.”



Household questionnaire to identify community leaders and priorities

3. Hold preliminary meetings with community leaders and enlist their support to mobilize community participation

Often vulnerable communities are skeptical of outsiders and have been on the receiving end of broken promises to improve community infrastructure or provide much needed basic services. Trying to engage communities directly through public calls for meetings without establishing community channels and trusted intermediaries may limit or delay your success in mobilizing communities to participate early in the program. Once Sowing Futures systematized the results of leaders identified by community members during the community assessment surveys, we convened leaders to introduce them to the program and request feedback and advice on how best to engage the broader community. We asked leaders to help us reach out to the community and to help organize the first community assembly meetings.



Meeting with community leaders to plan first community assembly meeting

Leaders proved instrumental in identifying the most effective methods for reaching out to communities. For example in one area where community participation has been particularly difficult, community members suggested we engage the schools and get the schoolchildren involved. We decided to set up a children’s fair with trampolines, cotton candy and children’s activities. We handed out invitations at school and asked the schoolchildren to encourage their parents to participate. Leaders also went door-to-door to hand out invitations and speak on behalf of the program and the importance of community participation at the assembly meetings. Sowing Futures staff and community leaders also spoke at neighborhood church services and community group events, such as senior citizen gatherings. In rural communities we used radio programs to talk about the program and mobile megaphone announcements to get the word out.

4. Hold community assembly meetings to elect local representation to coordinate program activities

Global Communities' PACE methodology works through a community coordination mechanism called Community Development Councils (CDCs). Our programs provide much of the knowledge and skills training to CDC members. Community capacity building activities such as long-term community development planning and project formulation and execution are led through and carried out by the CDCs. The goal is to build a critical mass of community capacity to enable communities to take ownership and put them in the driver's seat. While CDCs are set up as a program coordination mechanism, past experience has shown that the most successful CDCs organically transform into formal community-based organizations with legal representation and ability to receive funding from outside sources.



Communities vote for CDC members in community assembly meeting

CDCs derive their legitimacy through community assembly meetings where community members nominate candidates and votes are held out in the open. The program and community members agree upon basic principles of transparency and inclusive representation that ensures that vulnerable groups participate within the CDCs and have an active voice. Sowing Futures' communities' agreed to have ballots cast where community members were required to vote for at least one man and one woman in each ballot. Communities also agreed to designate CDC seats for youth and senior citizen representation.

5. Allow communities to prioritize and select quick impact projects to solidify support and galvanize local participation

It is important in your first community assembly meeting to select a community project that can be completed in a short period of time. These projects will build off of the initial enthusiasm at the prospect of the program's start-up. Quick impact projects (QIPs) allow from the outset for several things to happen simultaneously: (1) QIPs build CDC members' confidence as community leaders and facilitators, (2) QIPs quiet spoilers and help to convert those community members who had initially been on the fence about becoming involved (3) QIPs allow for the program to evaluate CDC capacities and begin to identify training needs.

We used the results from the initial community assessment to rank and present community priorities during the community assembly meetings. We then allowed community members to add additional priorities and to discuss and reprioritize amongst themselves. Certain parameters, including costs, timeframes, community contribution, and outside resource mobilization need to be established to help guide the conversation. Communities then voted and selected a first community project or activity that would help contribute to achieving the prioritized community objective. From there it's off to the races!



Communities select their first community quick impact project

Global Communities, along with the John Deere Foundation and the John Deere Brazil Foundation, has identified opportunities for expanding community development activities that catalyze meaningful change for communities in need located near John Deere's Brazil operations. The mission of this three-year program is to build the capacity of communities and local institutions to prioritize needs and mobilize resources that improve socio-economic conditions, particularly for at-risk youth.