



*Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.*



# THE POWER OF LOCAL ACTION

Learning from Communities on the Frontline of Sustainable Development





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Cite as: United Nations Development Programme. 2012. The Power of Local Action: Communities on the Frontline of Sustainable Development. New York, NY: UNDP.

Published by  
United Nations Development Programme 304 East 45th Street New York, NY 10017  
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# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	2
Global Challenges, Local Insights .....	3
The Local Level is the Incubator of Sustainable Development .....	4
Community-Based Solutions Have Been Hard-Won .....	5
UNDP's Commitment to Community-Based Work .....	5
Five Insights for Rio .....	6
Prioritizing Social Processes Brings Sustainability and Equity .....	6
Local Approaches Are the Building Blocks for Food, Water, and Energy Security .....	7
Community-Based Initiatives Can Promote Conflict Resolution and Peace Building .....	8
Innovation, Adaptation, and Resilience Arise Together With Successful Local .....	8
Ecosystem-Based Action .....	9
Community-Based Initiatives Can Increase Aid Effectiveness .....	10
From Rio to Rio: 20 Years of Lessons in Sustainable Local Development .....	11
Local Organizations Play a Central Role .....	11
Environmental Management is a Powerful Platform for Rural Development and Local Empowerment .....	12
Good Governance is Critical .....	13
Community-Based Action Delivers the MDGs .....	14
Scaling Brings Landscape-Level Transformations .....	15
An Enabling Environment Can Help .....	16
Supporting Successful Local Solutions .....	18
Provide the Enabling Conditions for Local Action .....	18
Support Development of a Community-Friendly Green Economy .....	19
Strengthen National Mechanisms to Support Community Action .....	19
Embrace New Sustainable Development Metrics .....	20
Commit to Local Involvement in Constructing the Post-MDG Framework .....	21
Resources and References .....	22
Analytical Reports .....	22
Web Resources .....	22

# 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.

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