Best Practices In Community Engagement

Global
Shea
Alliance

Contents

Introduction

Through the Global Shea Alliance Sustainability Program, more than 137,500 women gained access to warehouses, receive business services such as trainings and finance, and be empowered to protect existing and new shea parklands. These activities are being spearheaded by GSA sustainability partners across seven countries, working with various communities. Indeed, these sustainability program interventions are essentially community- based, making it necessary for partners to be well prepared and informed in their community engagement efforts.

This document has thus been designed, not as a prescriptive model for community engagement, mainly because communities are diverse and defined by a range of social, political and economic factors. What this best practices document provides are general guidelines and principles that partners should consider in their community engagement activities.

Community Engagement in simple terms "seeks to better engage the community to achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes, processes, relationships, discourse, decision-making or implementation". The community within this context is defined not only by geographical proximity but also by interests, affiliation/ identity and/or concerns. For example, in the case of constructing a warehouse for shea collectors, the community would be: women shea collectors, their families, local authorities, local chiefs, other NGOs, buyers, community members, etc.

Community engagement is critical in identifying community priorities, needs, resources, and solutions, as it also ensures representation, participation, ownership and accountability from all the actors. Moreover, community needs are interlinked, and often affected by a range of factors thus, the need for holistic approaches to addressing community needs. For instance, the ability of women to apply the skills gained from nursery development and parkland management is linked to their access to land. Therefore, engaging women groups, through trainings, without the involvement of community leaders on the subject of land rights/ access, could undermine the end goal of improving shea parklands.

General Principles And Processes For Community Engagement

Community engagement involves a range of processes and actors at different levels, with varying interests and/or influences within the community. Thus, even though community engagement must take into account the specific and unique context of every community, the guidelines below serve as general principles in community engagement.

1   KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY

- What are the customs, traditions and overall culture of the community? E.g. what is the predominant religion in the community? How does that shape social relations and behavior?
- What are some of the traditional practices that could impact your project? E.g. what land tenure system is used? Can women own land? How do women access land?
- Who are the key stakeholders and the different interest groups within the community?
- How do these different interest groups relate and interact?

Knowing your community helps to identify the opportunities that exist within the community, as well as potential challenges, and how they can be addressed. A community assessment should be conducted prior to initiation of community activities/ projects.


Women's cooperative in Wayamba, a predominantly Muslim community.

Community Assessment:

Community assessment is the process through which a community's needs, assets, strengths and challenges are identified. It entails an evaluation of the gaps that exist within the community and the resources available (internally) to meet these gaps. The assessment process helps to juxtapose the preferred/desired situation with the current situation, so as to identify existing gaps and needs.

What is the current situation?

What/where are the gaps between the current and the preferred?

What is the preferred situation?

Two main outcomes of community assessment are the identification of community needs and community assets. Community needs refer to the gaps that exist when the current situation is compared to the preferred situation. Community assets on the other hand are the resources that already exist within the community, which can contribute to meeting these needs. Assets can be in the form of individuals, projects, institutions, capabilities, funding, etc. Some examples of assets which communities have contributed to the warehouse construction include land, funds from women's cooperatives, and labor services.

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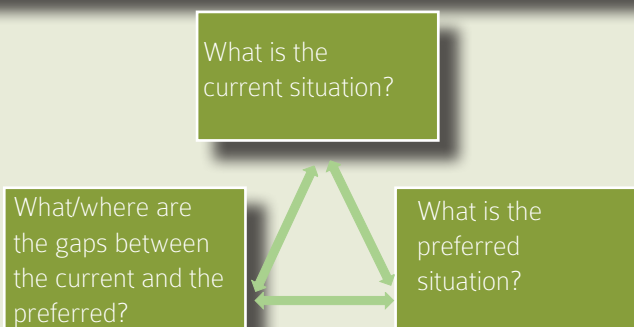
2 CONSULT THE COMMUNITY

- How does the community understand the need identified?
- How do they think it can/should be addressed?
- Have they tried to address the need in the past? How?
- What were the successes and/or the setbacks?
- What kind of (external) support do they think is needed to address the need?

The entire community should be involved in the consultation process (either directly or through representatives) so that, no group feels excluded or marginalized. Consulting the community also provides better insight and context because the community members have a better understanding of the issue and can proffer solutions that are socially feasible.

3 INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY

- Community stakeholders should not only be consulted in the initial stages of engagement. It is important for them to also be involved in the processes that would result in eventual implementation.
- Involvement should not only be focused on project beneficiaries, as the social dynamics within the community can impact project outcomes. For instance, even though projects in the shea sector are mostly targeted at women, it is important to engage men, albeit in secondary/support roles. When the men have a good understanding of the project goals from initiation, they serve as a source of support for the project.

4 BUILD PARTNERSHIPS

- What are the existing resources, opportunities and/or interventions within the community?
- How do your project goals align with the existing interventions?
- How can you collaborate with these existing interventions and/or leverage the resources available?

Collaborating with existing projects by other organizations is critical in this regard. E.g. integrating women's cooperative trainings into an existing/ongoing project such as Village Savings and Loans Associations, is a good way to leverage progress made by some of these projects and ensuring that interventions are not happening in silos.

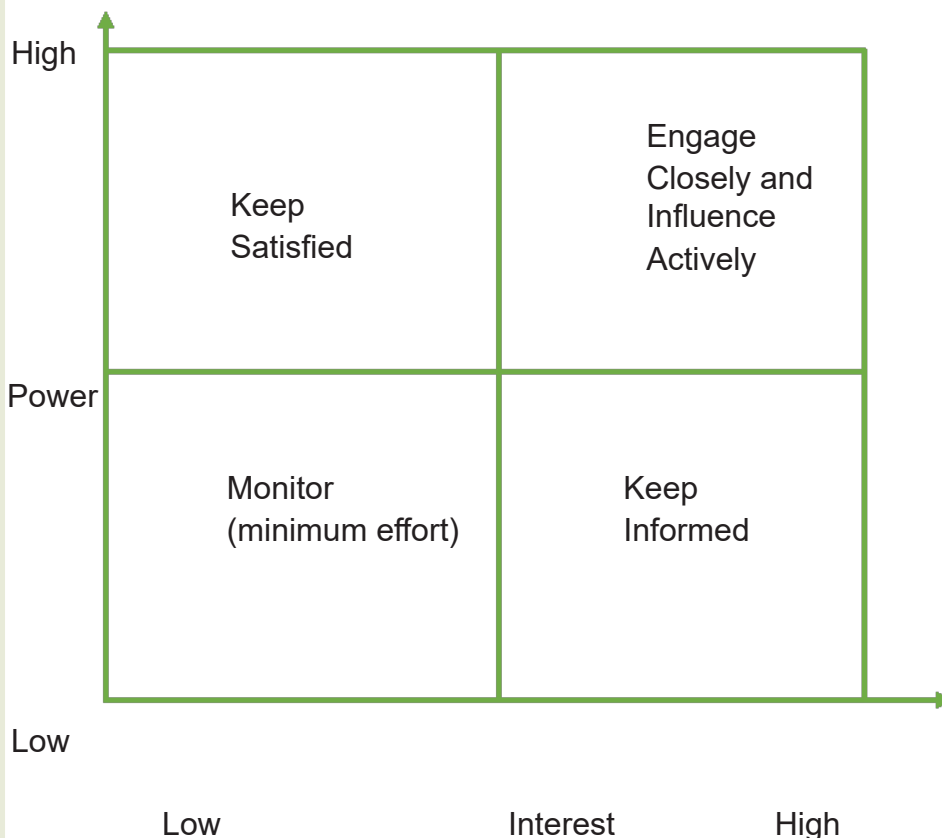*Women's group in Burkina Faso showing off their community nursery*

Community mobilization:

Community mobilization refers to the process through which resources, opportunities, interests, etc. that exist within the community are pulled together to achieve the needs of the community. It is a collaborative approach that creates synergies between the different actors in the community, while leveraging the resources and capabilities of the same. Identifying the different stakeholders and their roles/influences within the community is conducted through a process known as stakeholder mapping/analysis.

Stakeholder :

A stakeholder is an individual or group that is affected by/can influence (either positively or negatively) a project/policy. Stakeholders are also known as interest groups, and they have varying levels of power and influence. The stakeholder analysis is thus the process through which the different stakeholders are identified, and their power and influence analyzed.

Stakeholder Analysis Matrix

	Low Interest	High Interest
High Power	Keep Satisfied	Engage Closely and Influence Actively
Low Power	Monitor (minimum effort)	Keep Informed

Source: ODI

Stakeholders with high power and high interest must be engaged and brought on board as partners where possible. These are often decision makers with power and access to resources that could be leveraged for project success.

On the other hand, stakeholders with high power but low interest must be satisfied and where possible, should be engaged as patrons/supporters of the project.

Stakeholders with high interest but low power must be kept informed. They can be organized to serve as a local support group for the project.

Finally, stakeholders with low power and low interest should be monitored, making room for dialogue as necessary.

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5   COMMUNICATE AND EMPOWER

Effective communication, encompasses both how and when information is transmitted.
•   How is information made available to the community members? How often?
•   What are the means through which the community can provide feedback? How is feedback addressed?
•   Is the community informed enough to "champion" the intervention?

To make communication direct, concise and devoid of misrepresentations, establish community liaison(s). A community liaison would help to monitor outcomes and concerns within the community, both during project implementation and after the project has ended. Maintaining a relationship with the community even after the intervention helps with future follow ups and/or evaluation.

BUILD CAPACITY

- Have you trained community members who are able to lead the intervention?
- Is there a process through which the knowledge would be transferred at the community level to other members (indirect beneficiaries)?

Building the capacity of community members helps to ensure that the intervention would continue to benefit the community after the project life cycle. E.g. when women leaders receive training to become trainers in nursery development, they are able to continue raising seedlings even after the intervention.

Women shea cooperative in Burkina Faso planting seeds in their community nursery

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

- Be very direct and clear about the project goals. Communities have multiple needs and there is a tendency for expectations to be high.
- Avoid over-promising and communicate realistically about project limitations. E.g. You may be able to influence community leaders to donate land to women's cooperatives for warehouse construction, but you cannot guarantee changes to the land tenure rights in the community.

Conclusion

Community engagement is a long-term process that should be iterative, responding to the changing realities/needs of the community. A well designed community engagement process ensures that the community is a primary part of the intervention, rather than a "mere recipient", with the associated outcome of community ownership, leadership and accountability.

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