

Credocast

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A photograph of a rural village scene. In the foreground, a young boy in a red shirt is riding a bicycle on a paved road with yellow lane markings. Behind him is a dirt embankment. In the background, there is a simple building with a corrugated metal roof, laundry hanging on a line, and lush green trees under a dark, overcast sky.

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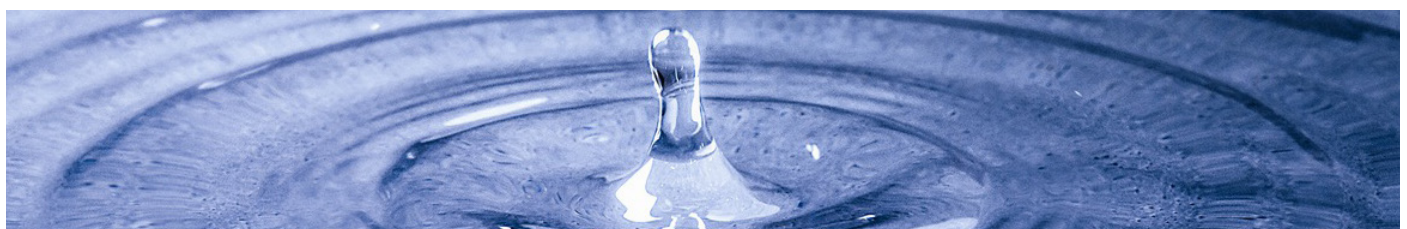
What distinguishes successful projects from less successful ones is the ability for the community to maintain the change after the initial project is completed.

About Credo Advisory

Credo Advisory is a strategic communications firm that specializes in designing and implementing strategic, operational and tactical communications initiatives. We provide a full suite of communications support to our clients, which include public communications and advocacy, government relations, community engagement, media relations, crisis communications, digital communications and capacity building.

Our mission is to develop bespoke communications products, activities and campaigns based on knowledge, research and industry insights. With our ability to communicate effectively with diverse audiences and stakeholder groups, Credo's mission is to provide impactful strategic communications advisory from inception to implementation. At Credo, we are committed to improving the way societies communicate.

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Introduction

Sometimes we undertake projects in communities outside of our own with preconceived notions or expectations about the work or community. We must be mindful that successfully effecting change must be inherently collaborative and centered on the wants and needs defined by communities themselves, not by “outsider change agents”, otherwise this can result in more harm than good.

Unintended harm

A typical example of an unintended consequence of a community project is the “One for One” model by TOMS shoes – a California based company famous for its lace-less shoes.¹ Their sales model meant that for every pair of TOMS shoes sold, the company would donate a pair to a child or woman in developing communities.² However, as a result of the influx of free TOMS shoes, local shoemakers were being put out of business, leading to economic decline and even more poverty.³

TOMS shoes have since changed its sales model to avoid disrupting local economies especially micro and small scale enterprises who are the most vulnerable and at risk businesses.



Collaborating for change

Now more than ever, people are seeking ways to improve living conditions in communities. While we cannot predict all the consequences of community work, it is important to think more broadly, try to understand the community context and prioritize collaborating with community stakeholders.

This thought piece offers an overview of guidelines and principles of collaborating to implement community-based projects through strategic and tactical community engagement approaches. These general principles are key for effective engagement initiatives with groups, community members and organizations to implement social change projects through partnerships, research, service, and learning.

¹ Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toms_Shoes

² Humanosphere (2014) Do TOMS shoes harm local shoe sellers? Available from: <http://www.humanosphere.org/social-business/2014/09/toms-shoes-harm-local-shoe-sellers/>

³ Humanosphere (2014) Do TOMS shoes harm local shoe sellers? Available from: <http://www.humanosphere.org/social-business/2014/09/toms-shoes-harm-local-shoe-sellers/>

“Community engagement must be hinged on a comprehensive political, economic and social analysis of the target beneficiaries.”

What is Community Engagement?

“Community engagement is increasingly acknowledged as a valuable process, not only for ensuring that communities can participate in the decisions that affect them and at a level that meets their expectations and needs, but also to strengthen and enhance the relationship between communities and governments and their agencies.”⁴ Community engagement is inherently about facilitating stakeholder/community participation in decision making and implementation, particularly at a local level to create sustainable impact.



Who is a Stakeholder?

A stakeholder is a person, community, group, or organization that is actively involved in a project, has a certain level of influence in a project or whose interest may be positively or negatively impacted by the outcome of a project. A stakeholder has an interest in the success (or failure) of the project and can be within or outside the organization that is sponsoring the project.⁵ Identifying and mapping project stakeholders is key due to their ability to either positively or negatively impact the project based on their level of interest in the project.⁶

Every community comprises of a range of stakeholders. These might include: residents, religious groups, racial, ethnic and cultural groups, voluntary groups, political groups, community associations, or other interest groups. It is essential to utilize a range of mechanisms and avenues to facilitate the most targeted possible participation from these interests as it ultimately determines the success of the project.

⁴ National Agency for the Control of Aids, NACA (2017) Sustainable community engagement strategy - A guide for collective action for increased uptake of HIV/AIDS and other health services. Available from: <https://naca.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Sustainable-Community-Engagement-Strategy.pdf>

⁵ Peter. L (2017) Project Manager. Available from: <https://www.projectmanager.com/blog/what-is-a-stakeholder>

“Collecting information is a critical component of assessing and learning about a community.”

Engagement guidelines

Community engagement plans will need to be open to adaptation and flexibility. Once on-site (if planning is done remotely) or prior to any community assessment, many aspects of the project plan may shift due to unforeseen constraints, unknown priorities of the community, re-defined goals or outcomes determined through deeper community engagement. This engagement must be hinged on a comprehensive political, economic and social analysis of the community. Only after this can certain “ground truths” about the community be determined.

1 Conduct research

Collecting information is a critical component of assessing and learning about a community. In data gathering, it is important to recognize that the community members are the most knowledgeable on community norms, issues, customs and way of life and are, therefore, the best sources of information.⁷ However, state/local government networks and support organisations should be involved in identifying community stakeholders, their interests and needs and how best to engage with them. They too, can provide important intelligence on local communities. Some issues to consider researching include:

- What impact the project will have on the stakeholder interests?
- Are there existing community networks or forms of communication that can be leveraged?
- Are there gaps in information which can be solved through local knowledge?
- Who in the community can be a project champion, influencer and advocate or the contrary?

2 Define objectives

Set objectives that utilize a strategy for measuring impact objectively.⁸ A few questions to consider when setting project goals are: What are the project objectives? Are the success metrics valuable to community stakeholders? Think beyond project completion -- what is the anticipated impact of your project to the lives, culture and social fabric of the community? For example, how would a solar mini-grid community project boost the local economy?

3 Communicate effectively

To maximize levels of community participation and sensitization, disseminating communications products within the community is critical. Sensitization materials should be simple, accessible and cognizant of language and literacy levels in the community. Videos, pamphlets, posters and other materials should showcase relatable and clear examples or case studies of how the proposed project is likely to affect the community.

⁷ Community Places (2014) Community planning toolkit - Community engagement Available from: <https://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/sites/default/files/Engagement.pdf>

⁸ Kidasa Software. Available from: <https://kidaso.com/defining-project-goals-and-objectives/>

“To maximize levels of community participation and sensitization, disseminating communications products within the community is critical.”

Also, because many rural communities (in developing countries) have strong oral orientation, it is invaluable to organize events such as townhalls and community meetings for direct engagement with community members on how to collaborate for greater and sustainable impact.⁹ During such interactions and throughout the project lifespan engagement with community members must be collaborative and culturally sensitive. These townhalls are also critical for consultations, getting feedback and creating a sense of ownership and involvement for community stakeholders.

4 Anticipate conflict

Conflict is an inherent part of social change and community engagement. As a result, being able to leverage effective communications and conflict resolution strategies is essential to working with the community to achieve shared success. Challenges are always easier to address while still minimal, therefore, addressing early warning signs is essential. This mitigation could result in saving the project unanticipated costs or project delays.

Crisis mitigation must be managed through scenario planning and establishing a system of communication through which stakeholders can escalate any signs of risk or problems once detected. Being proactive and developing contingency plans ahead of time will reduce any potential negative consequences that may have resulted.

5 Prioritizing sustainability



Sustainability is the most important part of the project.¹⁰ The community should be empowered with the ability to maintain the project beyond the engagement experience with minimal assistance from the project team. What distinguishes successful sustainable projects from less successful ones is the ability for the community to maintain the change after the initial project is completed. At project initiation, develop a sustainability plan that focuses on long-term project continuation by integrating project goals with the community aspirations. Samples of sustainability efforts include:

⁹ Community Places (2014) Community planning toolkit - Community engagement Available from: <https://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/sites/default/files/Engagement.pdf>

¹⁰ Henry, L and Jill, O (2012) The project as a social system, Asia-Pacific perspectives on project management. Available from: <http://books.publishing.monash.edu/apps/bookworm/view/The+Project+as+a+Social+System%3A+Asia-Pacific+Perspectives+on+Project+Management/171/OEBPS/c11.htm>

“To properly evaluate project impact, proper assessment mechanisms must be established and implemented consistently.”

- Attaining government support for project activities. The government can enact policies to support project objectives as well as create an enabling environment for the project.
- Recruiting, training and engaging community champions, particularly women who will facilitate and promote the project activities within their homes and the community.
- Depending on the project, developing “Community Sustainability Groups” comprising of community bodies and residents (e.g., schools, community organizations, government agencies, women, physically challenged, youth, etc.) and engaging them in the project implementation is beneficial. Through such sustainability groups, advocacy efforts and coalitions can work to influence and galvanize locals to ensure project continuity.

6 Evaluate impact

If the project goal was to build a borehole in a community without access to clean water, project impact assessment is paramount. How many residents were influenced to use the borehole water instead of from the contaminated local stream? How many residents now have access to clean water? Is there a decline in the number of water-borne diseases in the community? These results would serve as impact indicators.

To properly evaluate project impact, proper assessment mechanisms must be established and implemented consistently. Some mechanisms include; exit interviews, focus group discussions, informal conversations, and KPI surveys. Whichever strategy selected, the goal is to qualitatively and quantitatively determine how the project improved the community. Use findings to further improve project delivery.



Conclusion

Community engagement ensures that community members support and contribute meaningfully to project activities meant to develop their functional capabilities and improve their way of life. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to community engagement, for a sustainably successful project, comprehensive engagement strategies must be deployed to facilitate project execution and the desired project impact.

Collaborating with community residents as highlighted in the guidelines is a pre-requisite for successful project implementation and sustainability. Additionally, a well designed and implemented engagement strategy will foster the “do no harm” principle as was witnessed in the TOMS case study.