



strengthening rural communities

Community sustainability

The concept of community sustainability is an important starting point for stronger rural communities .

Sustainable communities are those maintain and improve their social, economic and environmental characteristics so that residents can continue to lead healthy, productive and enjoyable lives. Sustainable development in these communities is based on the understanding that a healthy environment and a healthy economy are both necessary for a healthy society.(Flora 1994)

Sustainable communities protect and enhance the environment and promote strong levels of social organisation and collective action.

This definition recognises the importance of striking a balance between environmental concerns and development objectives, while simultaneously enhancing local social capital in all its forms.

- All parts and functions of the community are interconnected
- The well being of all members and all parts of the community needs to be improved
- The focus is on sustainable, community vibrancy and resilience, rather than narrow goals of employment and income.

A holistic approach to sustainability has proven to be successful in helping communities to strengthen their economy. The tools and strategies have been designed to enhance and strengthen, rather than duplicate and replace existing planning processes and economic development efforts.

The key elements of any community renewal program are

- People
- Organisations
- Resources
- Relationships

People in the Community

Sustainable communities are made up of people with a “can do” attitude and a visible, proactive response to change.

Sustainable communities exhibit a sense of pride and openness to new ideas and alternatives. They value education and demonstrate an awareness of the economic impact of social issues. Their leadership base is diverse. They work to involve others and mobilise the community around common aims.



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Where there are strongly held beliefs and attitudes in the community, these can either hinder or promote sustainability. This element explores the attitudes and behaviour related to initiative, leadership and community optimism.

Organisations in the Community

Sustainable communities work to develop the organisational capacity and leadership to get things done. Social and economic development organisations in these communities work together to achieve common goals and target their resources for achievable outcomes.

This element explores the organisational relationships within the community, the capacity of organisations to work together in the interests of community development, to resolve conflicts and encourage active participation in their activities.

Resources in the Community

Sustainable communities are aware of their local resources and strengths and build on these to achieve their long- term sustainability. They look for appropriate external resources to achieve their goals. They take steps to reduce their dependency on external factors and spend their money with a long- term view to the future of the community.

This element examines how resources are viewed and used by the community, and helps the community identify the existing balance between internal and external reliance.

Relationships and Capacity

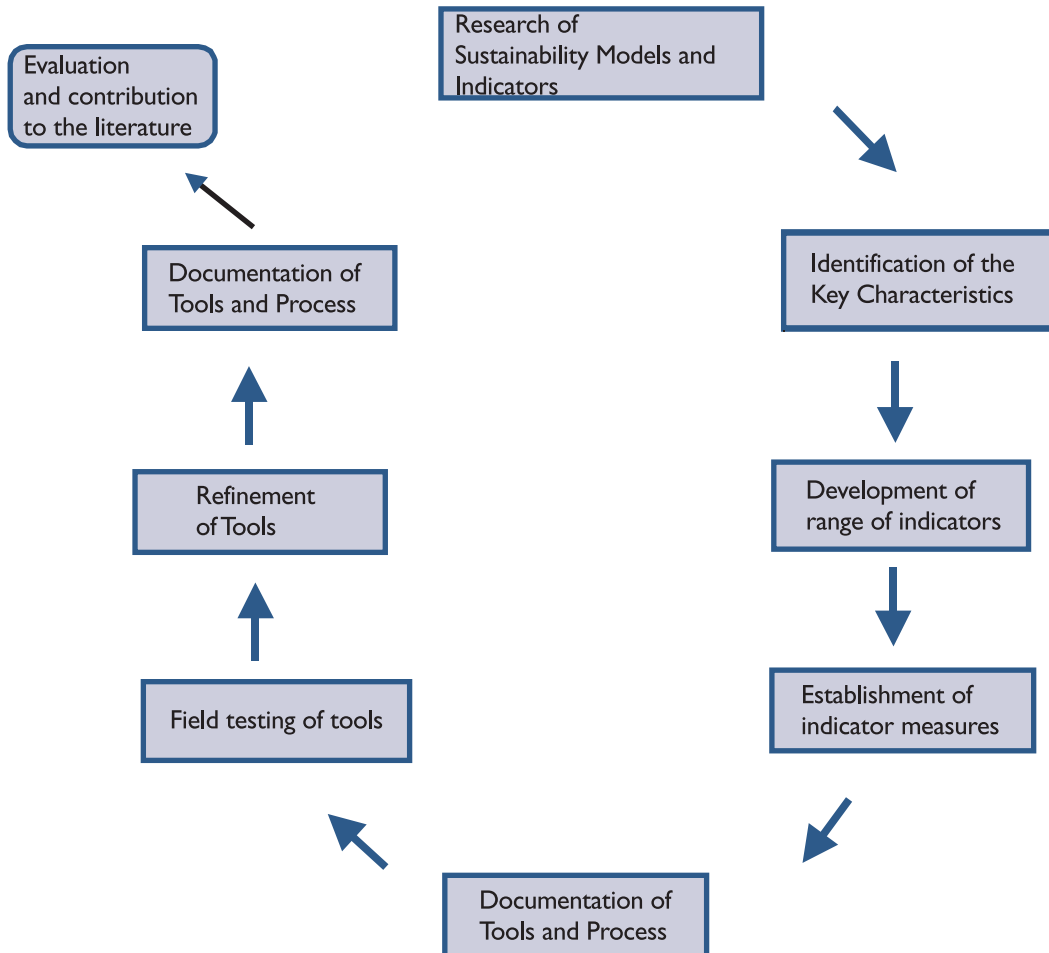
Sustainable communities take the time to research, analyse and plan their future.

They value the contributions of all parts of the community. Where there is a high level of participation by the community in decision-making, longer term goals are more achievable and broad ownership of the problems and solutions can generate high levels of community capacity.



Figure 5

Development Process for the Sustainability Tools



Key Characteristics

Ten key characteristics of sustainable communities have been developed, based on research in other developed countries. They are strongly predictive and relate to each other. Communities will experience different levels of sustainability in each characteristic and these levels may change over time. Some characteristics will play a more significant role in determining resilience and sustainability in some communities, depending upon the nature of local stresses, community values and the impacts of change.

Every community is complex and unique and the characteristics provide insights and directions for communities to plan their future.

The characteristics are not meant to be exhaustive.

The processes and tools promote the importance of community ownership of the strategies and information that emerges. Statistical data combined with systematic observation can help communities to move beyond short term solutions and consider the often hidden dimensions of a small community.

The ten key characteristics of a sustainable community used throughout the resource package are outlined in Table 2.



Table 2
Key Characteristics

A sustainable community is one that:

1. takes an integrated approach to creating a sustainable future
2. maximises the use of its limited time and resources in areas that will yield the greatest strategic benefits
3. develops plans that merge social and economic goals and build local capacity
4. mobilises itself around priorities
5. harnesses local support and attracts the outside resources needed to achieve its goals
6. uses its critical mass of cooperating organisations to implement and evaluate locally based initiatives.
7. has strong, inclusive and visionary leadership
8. encourages active participation, consultation and involvement for community well-being
9. supports local investment in education, training and lifelong learning
10. has access to positive and accurate information with which to evaluate its progress in achieving goals