

Context Paper Nine

Community Envisioning: Definition, Purpose, Dynamics, Process and Benefits

What is the community envisioning exercise?

Community envisioning is a social interactive process designed to help define a community's development aspiration and to develop a mental picture of the state to be achieved. It is an exercise to help community members articulate their aspirations collectively and in an organized way. It focusses a community's collective interests into a commonly agreed upon vision. The community vision becomes the organizing principle and a guide to motivate all community development actions.

Community envisioning is an excellent tool for socially preparing a community for development planning and work, helping to bring the community together for interaction.

Community Envisioning Functions by:

- creating awareness,
- education,
- resolving conflict,
- consensus-building,
- decision-making,
- collective action, and
- empowerment.

What is the purpose of community envisioning?

A vision is a powerful tool that motivates action to achieve success. It is a necessary tool for all - for individuals, families, communities, nations, regions, and even for the world.

As individuals, if we want to succeed we must have a vision for ourselves. For example, my vision for myself is to be a development practitioner - working with individuals and organizations to promote development that is socially just, ecologically sustainable, economically viable, culturally vibrant, and politically participatory. I have made that vision my mission and occupation.

Many families have a vision for themselves that determines the way they will develop the progress of their family. Likewise, most nations have their respective visions. For example, Malaysia has a vision called Vision 2020 - that is, a vision to become a developed nation by the year 2020.

SARC, ASEAN, EEC and other regional groupings also have visions of their own. These visions guide the kind of development they aspire to and pursue. The UN Charter is a global vision for a just, equitable, and peaceful world order. Agenda 21 is another example of a world vision to achieve development that is ecologically sustainable in the 21st century.

So why not a vision for the community?

A community is for this purpose defined as a group of households living in a particular geographical boundary such as a watershed, a village, a hamlet, or a town. A community envisioning exercise, both as a process and as an output, is an excellent development tool.

What are the Dynamics Involved in the Community Envisioning Exercise?

- A continuing process

Community envisioning is a continuing process. A vision for the future cannot remain the same. It has to respond to changing circumstances and adjust to the changes that unfold. Like the 'horizon', it challenges and guides us to move ahead. However, as we progress and reach our goals, the 'horizon' continues to move ahead of us - all the time challenging and guiding us for continuous progress. This is sometimes called the aspiration of 'divine discontent'. We are never content with what we have, but always want more and more. This innate tendency is the key to progress - if guided and channelled positively. Community envisioning is one such positive approach.

- A participatory process

A community is made up of a large number of people. It is ideal but not possible for everyone to participate in the process all at once. The envisioning exercise can begin with the stakeholders and the community leadership, but it must involve the participation of as many groups and people in the community as possible. The more people involved in the envisioning exercise the better. Ownership of the vision must be transferred to the community. The stronger the ownership, the stronger the action, collaboration, and cooperation among community members.

- A consensus document

There must be collective agreement and endorsement from the community that the vision represents most, if not all of their own aspirations as members of the community. It is a consensus document. Consensus means giving as well as taking, with the spirit of common good as the overriding principle. Everybody participating knows they will benefit. It is creating a win-win situation for all.

- Owned by the community

Needless to say, a community vision must be owned by the community, but this may not be easy to do. The local leadership must keep this vision always visible, and must continue to transfer and strengthen the community ownership at all times, especially among the marginalised and disadvantaged groups. The greater the sense of ownership, the stronger the urge for action, collaboration, and cooperation. Good leaders are masters in creating community visions and in transferring the ownership of the vision to the community.

- There must be a mission to attain the vision

The vision must be accompanied by a mission, a defined statement of commitment and action to attain the vision. The mission statement is a prerequisite in motivating action to translate a vision into reality. The vision is like the electric bulb which has the capability to give light. The mission is the power that lights the bulb to give us the light and guide us on the journey towards our destination to attain our vision.

How to Plan a Community Envisioning Exercise?

Community envisioning can be undertaken for general development purposes or for very specific concerns. For our purpose, the concern is very specific - for natural resource management at the watershed level through people's participation. This focus determines our planning process for community envisioning. What are the main elements involved in the planning process?

- A prerequisite for the planning process

Community envisioning is not an isolated and independent process, but is an integral part of a community planning

process for development. It precedes the planning process, because the community vision and mission statements provide the basis and guide for planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes of a community development plan. In other words, envisioning should precede any development planning that requires the involvement and participation of people.

- Participants

Who will participate in the process? Naturally, people in the watershed who depend on the natural resources for their livelihood will be the participants. They will include farmers and others who use the natural resources for their livelihood and income. The stronger their stake, the greater will be their interest in participating. The participants must be stakeholders, carefully selected for the envisioning exercise. They must include representatives of men, women, youth, and even children if possible, so that everyone's concerns are taken into consideration. The ideal number should not exceed 30, with six to eight members representing one interest group.

- The facilitator and the reporters

Community envisioning needs the participation of a group of stakeholders in the community. Good facilitators are required to facilitate the process along with a number of good reporters who can help the workshop groups capture the envisioning and mission statements and finally synthesise the various views into a consensus and collective document. They can either be brought in or selected from amongst the participants.

- The duration

The envisioning exercise ideally requires about nine hours: two hours for the workshop process to articulate the vision, and two hours to make group reports, discuss, and build consensus on the vision statement. Then, the second process of defining a mission statement will require another four hours - two hours for workshop deliberations and two hours for group reports, discussions, and consensus-building. The remaining hour is for briefing and for breaks for lunch and refreshments. If there is a time constraint, the duration can be adjusted - but experience shows it should not be less than five hours.

- The schedule

The duration framework can be the guide for the agenda schedule for the envisioning process. The schedule looks as follows.

Introduction and Briefing

Workshop 1: Various groups brainstorm and develop a draft vision.

Plenary 1: Each group presents its respective report. After all the reports are presented, a discussion is facilitated. A collective draft vision is finalised.

Break: Lunch and refreshment

Workshop 2: The same groups reconvene and develop a mission statement for the draft collective vision developed at the end of Plenary 1.

Plenary 2: The groups reconvene and each group presents its respective report. After all reports are presented, a discussion is facilitated. A collective draft mission is finalised.

The Venue and Materials

Community envisioning is best undertaken in the community, under trees if other space is not available. However, the venue must have adequate space to enable the participants to meet in plenary and workshop discussions. The participants must be provided with paper, pens, and other relevant materials to record their discussions for reporting, presentation, and building consensus.

How to Conduct the Community Envisioning Exercise?

- The workshop process.
- A quick and effective way of conducting community envisioning is through a workshop.
- A group of carefully selected participants from amongst the stakeholders in the community, particularly leaders, are invited to participate.
- The group includes men, women, and youths, and numbers not more than 30. If possible, a children's group can also be included.
- They sit in their respective groups and, by brainstorming and discussing, they reach a consensus on the question we wish to address. In our case it will be:

what kind of development do we aspire to achieve through the sustainable use and management of our watershed?

- Each group will be facilitated by an appointed facilitator and notes of the proceedings will be recorded by an appointed reporter. If the participants are able, this task can be assigned to them.
- Give the group between one to two hours to do this, depending on the time available.
- The Plenary Process
- Once the allocated time is up, the workshops are brought to an end. Then the groups build consensus.
- In the plenary, each group reports on its respective group discussions.
- After all the reports are made, there is a general discussion to validate, prioritise and build consensus.
- A good facilitator, with two writers are assigned to draft the vision. They will cull from the discussion

and obtain consensus from the plenary on the vision drafted.

- This process usually takes about two hours, but can be shortened to one hour if time is a constraint.
- The Second Workshop
- The group then goes into a second workshop.
- Again they break into their respective groups to discuss the second question that helps them to articulate the mission. The question they will address in this workshop, according to our requirement, is as follows.

What can You Do to Achieve the Vision Drafted?

- The groups are given between one and two hours to discuss this question, depending on the time available.
- Each group will be facilitated by an appointed facilitator and the notes of the proceedings will be recorded by an appointed reporter. If the participants are able, this task can be assigned to them.
- The Second Plenary
- After the allocated time for the workshop is over, the groups come into a second plenary.
- Each group makes its report to the plenary.
- After all the reports are made, there follows a general discussion to validate, prioritise, and build consensus.
- Again a good facilitator and two writers are assigned to draft the mission statement.

Community Consultation, Validation, and Endorsement Process

Now there is a draft vision and mission statement for development generated by the community for the sustainable use and management of its watershed. The question is - what next? Two processes follow.

- One, the vision and mission statement provide the basic background document for a community development plan. Community planning for watershed management must be premised on the draft vision and mission statements.
- Second, the document becomes the basis for community discussions to disseminate and transfer ownership of the draft version and mission statement to the entire community in the watershed. This is an ongoing process to create greater awareness and build continued community consensus and motivation for action in managing their watershed sustainably.

Example - the case study of Infanta

Let us examine the process carried out in one community by the Farmer-centred Agricultural Resource Management (FARM) Programme.

Infanta, in Quezon Province of the Philippines, is an early FARM Programme field site. The Infanta community, facilitated by a local NGO partner of the FARM Programme called ICDA (Infanta Community Development Association Incorporated), undertook a very successful and extensive community envisioning exercise.

First, through a stakeholder workshop, a draft vision (and mission) for sustainable resource use and community development in Infanta was undertaken.

Second, the draft vision was discussed, validated, and endorsed as the collective community mission and vision by villages and groups.

The envisioning exercise took more than one year and more than 40 consultations to arrive at the following vision and mission.

The Vision

A vibrant, participative, humane, and value-laden community, promoting the protection and conservation of the different ecosystems which provide safe, nutritious, and natural food while ensuring a healthy habitat for the welfare of all community members.

The Mission

We, the Infanta community, recognise that the agricultural resource base is essential to our survival and livelihood. Therefore, we commit ourselves to giving priority to agricultural resources in our decisions by:

- adopting sustainable agricultural practices,
- promoting food production to ensure food security,
- conserving and protecting our environment and natural resources, and
- ensuring people's participation in planning, implementing, and decision-making.

Guidelines for Monitoring

How do we know we are making progress with our mission to attain our vision?

To be able to do this, we need some signposts or milestones that indicate the progress of our journey towards realising our vision. These signposts are often called indicators. What will be some indicators to monitor the progress of the mission of Infanta towards achieving the vision of the infanta community?

- One group of indicators to monitor will be to identify the priority given to the care and conservation of natural resources in the major decisions of the municipality, community, and groups.

- The second group of indicators for monitoring is to observe changes in agricultural practices adopted for sustainable agriculture.
- The third group of indicators for monitoring can be evidence that indicates an improvement in household food security.
- And the fourth group of indicators for monitoring could be based on people's participation, both in the local decision-making process and their actual participation in realising the vision.

Monitoring must be carried out regularly, probably at quarterly annual intervals. The ideas to formulate indicators for monitoring are often drawn from the mission statement and help determine the progress being made in realising the vision.

Establishing indicators and devising a plan for monitoring can be carried out in two ways. The first approach is for the group which undertakes the visioning exercise to also develop indicators to monitor the progress and to determine the monitoring duration as well. The second approach is to select and mandate a small group to formulate indicators and to have the responsibility to monitor.

The most important elements in the process are as follow.

- The indicators must be developed and communicated as widely as possible in the community. The more people are aware of the monitoring indicators, the better will community awareness, education, and participation improve.
- A number of people must be assigned and made responsible for monitoring at predetermined regular intervals. The community must know who is doing the monitoring and when.
- The result of the monitoring must be fed back to the community continuously and as widely as possible. The community must know the progress they are making and the difficulties they are confronting. Such knowledge will motivate greater involvement and participation in the community.

Procedure for Evaluation

What has been the outcome of the vision and mission developed earlier and how has the outcome had an impact on the people and community?

As already noted, the vision and mission statements provide the basis for the community planning to address current problems or improve certain conditions. This is the community development plan. A comprehensive community development plan must include a monitoring and an evaluation plan. Evaluating the development plan in fact leads to evaluating the success of vision and the mission adopted.

However, the community envisioning exercise is also a social process for capacity-building and motivating action. The impact of the vision and mission statements must also be evaluated. One recommended approach to make this evaluation is to organize a stakeholders' workshop to reflect on and discuss the impact the vision and mission had on their actions and their achievements. The evaluation workshop will also be a reflection and learning process for the community.

What are the Benefits of the Community Envisioning Exercise?

The community envisioning exercise has three clear distinct groups of benefits.

- First, it is a very effective way of bringing a community together for interaction, consensus-building, and decision-making.
- Second, it is an excellent approach for creating community awareness, education, and empowerment.
- Third, it is a powerful mechanism for motivation, promoting commitment, and initiating action at the community level for self-improvement.