Practice Insights

Community Development and the Climate Crisis
About IACD

The International Association for Community Development is the global network for professional community development practitioners. We promote shared understanding of community development as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality, and social justice, through the organisation, education, and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings.

What do we do?
We facilitate learning and practice exchange, both virtually and face-to-face. We work with partners to deliver regional, national, and international events, study visits, and conferences. We document the work our members are doing worldwide by collecting case studies, tools, and materials on community development, and sharing these through our website, publications, and e-bulletins. We undertake specific projects and carry out research, drawing on international experience.

IACD aims to give its members a voice at the global level, advocating for community development principles and practice in international forums and consultations. IACD has consultative status with the UN and its agencies.

Contributing articles
Our International Practice Insights publications are issued three times a year, each one focusing on a particular theme of relevance to community development. If you would like further information or to contribute to future editions, please contact membership@iacdglobal.org. Alternatively, IACD members are welcome at any time to contribute news items, research, case studies or other materials to our members’ Facebook site and to the IACD website.

Join us
For full details and to join, go to www.iacdglobal.org/join-us.

Benefits of membership include:
- Regular social media news posts about community and international development;
- Access to community development resources on the IACD website;
- Opportunities to participate in Practice Exchange study visits;
- Discounted rates at IACD conferences;
- Discounted subscriptions to the Community Development Journal;
- Opportunities to share your work and experiences with a global audience, through our regular members’ e-bulletin, YouTube channel, social media sites, and other publications;
- Members also have the opportunity to nominate to serve on the IACD Board of Trustees.

Our next AGM will be held 26th July 1pm BST

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Over recent decades, large-scale deforestation has become common in San Isidro, a rural community in Nueva Ecija province, Philippines. Such deforestation resulted from wood-reliant livelihood activities including charcoal-production and furniture-making, along with kaingin (slash and burn) practices, used to clear areas for farmland. Because of these unsustainable processes, San Isidro residents increasingly suffer from the detrimental consequences of chronic environmental degradation. During the rainy season, people are frequently impacted by landslides, flash floods, silted rivers, and strong winds, especially during typhoons. During dry seasons, in turn, little tree coverage contributes to increased temperatures and humidity.

Considering these environmental stressors’ impact on their community, a local women’s group, San Isidro Kaakibat sa Pag-unlad Association (SIKAP), recognized that reforesting the surrounding hills can reverse many of their existing challenges. In 2022 and with the support of a locally based non-profit, Outreach Philippines, Inc. (OPI), SIKAP planned, implemented, and is currently managing a community-wide tree-planting initiative of more than 25,000 trees. In what follows, we elaborate on the activities and learning that emerged from SIKAP’s Tree Planting initiative.

**OPI & Participatory Human Development**

OPI has been facilitating community-led development since the mid-1980s, gaining their official non-profit registration in 1994. In 2020, OPI supported initiatives in 17 rural communities across Luzon, and Isabela, Masbate, and Nueva Ecija provinces. OPI’s main goal is to empower rural communities, enabling them to resolve their poverty-related issues by themselves. OPI facilitators do this by following the Participatory Human Development (PHD) methodology. PHD is a systematic, comprehensive, and time-bound methodology that follows an often-cyclical process to learning that includes analysis, planning, action, evaluation, and reflection. Following this process, OPI practitioners support people to resolve their issues, establish community-managed projects, form sustainable community-based organizations, and establish support networks with other organizations.

In 2019, OPI started working with San Isidro residents, assigning a staff member - a Human Development Facilitator (HDF) - to gather community members and support them in identifying and acting on their commonly experienced poverty-related problems. During their first community meeting, called the Problem, Identification, and Prioritization Meeting, residents identified deforestation as a serious concern among 12 other identified challenges. The group, however, chose to not prioritize it at the time due to more pressing problems related to health and sanitation, food security, and livelihood. Residents also worried that the issue of deforestation was too big to tackle, especially since they had just started working together as a group.

In 2020, SIKAP gained formal registration as a People’s Organization, under the Department of Labor and Employment. They have since developed into an organization with strong networks locally and abroad, diverse experiences on issue mobilizations and project management, capable leadership, and solid membership. To ensure SIKAP will become a self-reliant and sustainable organization, OPI’s assigned HDF, Elvis, facilitated collective actions including on-the-job training. Such facilitation is typically informed by the PHD approach to learning, that is, first, analyze, then plan, act, and lastly evaluate and reflect on the process to consider challenges and formulate recommendations for future improvement. In practice, this involves guiding leaders through a logical process of addressing their community’s needs, providing technical support where needed, and facilitating frequent evaluation and reflection sessions with both leaders and members to stimulate critical thinking, and recommendations for future activities.

**SIKAP’s Tree Planting Narrative**

Considering their development as an organization, and feeling more confident in their capacity, SIKAP decided to act upon their community’s deforestation concerns in January 2021. As a solution, SIKAP decided to reforest 25 hectares of their surrounding hills with 25,000 seedlings of fruit-bearing and non-fruit-bearing native trees. To secure the necessary funding, SIKAP submitted a project proposal called “Back for the Future: A Reforestation Project” to the Department of Labor and Employment. The proposal was approved, and SIKAP was awarded the necessary funding of P3.1 million. The project has a 2-year timeframe, and the implementation will follow a time-bound methodology that follows an often-cyclical process to learning that includes analysis, planning, action, evaluation, and reflection. Following this process, OPI practitioners support people to resolve their issues, establish community-managed projects, form sustainable community-based organizations, and establish support networks with other organizations.

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Following project approval, SIKAP led three major sets of activities. First, they mobilized to access training, seedlings, tree-planting volunteers, and secured government assistance to identify the land needing immediate reforestation. Second, SIKAP members received training on Reforestation and Nursery Establishment before the actual tree planting. Members prioritized such training since no SIKAP members had previous forestry experience. Finally, SIKAP started with tree planting in June 2022. This started a three-month tree planting effort, with SIKAP members and volunteers from 14 partner organizations (including government agencies, local government units, and civil society organizations) meeting on the mountain every Tuesday to plant together. This consistent Tuesday planting led to the project’s nickname, “Matreese” meaning more trees.

In November 2022, SIKAP exceeded their initial intentions, getting 31,450 seedlings into the ground, 6,450 more than planned. Of these saplings, 18,500 were produced by SIKAP Association members, 10,000 were accessed from the Municipal Mayor, and 2,950 from various individuals and organizations.

SIKAP’s conversations with the landowner drew directly from the group’s in-depth knowledge of the issue at hand, and such knowledge, in turn, stems from sessions during which they, alongside Elvis, conducted deep analyses of the contributing factors and impact of deforestation in their area, all the way through to reflecting on the outcomes of their planning and actions.

One of the major challenges during the project’s implementation stage was the distance between some of the planting areas and SIKAP’s village. Members need to walk, on average, two to three hours each direction from their homes to the reforestation site. With this challenge in mind, Elvis facilitated an initial project assessment session that focused on evaluating the project’s challenges - evaluation being one of the key tenets of the PhD methodology’s cyclical approach to human development. Their session resulted in a set of recommendations, which included adjusting the tree planting time frame, with planters leaving the village at around 4am in the morning instead of 8am. During this session, it was also decided that instead of SIKAP, the land owner will support in monitoring the trees’ conditions going forward. The landowner agreed to such monitoring, after SIKAP leaders, with Elvis’ support, illustrated to him how much he is already saving because of the group’s actions toward reforestation. SIKAP’s conversations with the landowner drew directly from the group’s in-depth knowledge of the issue at hand, and such knowledge, in turn, stems from sessions during which they, alongside Elvis, conducted deep analyses of the contributing factors and impact of deforestation in their area, all the way through to reflecting on the outcomes of their planning and actions.

Tree Planting as a Platform for Collaboration

“We thought it was just simple: grow seedlings in potting bags and plant them in the mountains. We were not yet aware of the many steps we had to undergo to achieve our targets,” Dorita, a SIKAP leader shared in 2021 when asked what she thinks about SIKAP’s Tree Planting project. These unexpected steps mostly consisted of bringing other people and organizations in to collaborate on their tree-planting initiative.

Considering the project’s scope, one thing was certain to SIKAP from the start - they needed local support from government offices. They began exploring what government support might look like (either seedling donations, or volunteer planters) and submitted requests to the Village Council, Office of the Mayor and Municipal Council and government agencies in charge of environmental concerns. As they talked to these offices, they were directed to local police offices and even the Armed Forces of the Philippines for additional support. They learned that police and soldiers were willing to help by participating in the actual planting of seedlings. Additionally, they found that some government workers belong to or knew of socio-civic organizations who may be interested to participate.

All of SIKAP’s networking efforts paid off. At the project’s launch on June 27, 2022, approximately 150 volunteers showed up to support the reforestation efforts. SIKAP created their own social media page after the launch, which proved to be another means of reaching more groups. One notable group was a non-government organization that focuses on micro-lending, wanting to join the tree planting activity. What started as a simple collaboration with a few good people branched out to include many other supporters who wanted to collaborate in addressing climate change.

Major Takeaways and Success Factors

This once-in-a-lifetime experience of SIKAP in combating environmental degradation locally has brought many lessons to the fore, not only for its members and leaders but also for its partners.

One of the most significant takeaways, especially for SIKAP leaders and OPI practitioners, is the importance of networking and collaborating with various stakeholders. The collaboration with government and non-government actors described in the section above resulted in the project’s timely and successful implementation. In turn, a good track record in project implementation can attract more support not only locally but internationally.

Capacity (in this case, SIKAP’s knowledge and skills) is another important factor ensuring project success. The tree planting project was launched when SIKAP leaders already had basic knowledge and the project development and management, gained over the years of implementing smaller, simpler scale projects. Such project development then provided the platform for them to take on a huge tree planting initiative. Working together as a group has also made SIKAP aware of the value of teamwork, flexibility, and good time management.

In addition, SIKAP leaders claimed that having strong communication practices, using face-to-face interaction as well as online platforms, sped up the project’s implementation. They emphasized the importance of solid support systems, including training from OPI, support from village officials and local government, as well as their families. The latter is especially important, considering the extra time leaders spent, often away from their homes, on ensuring the project’s success. Other family members had to step in and take over their household and family responsibilities. Spouses also often accompanied leaders during tree planting and monitoring activities.

Elvis Gatchalian, the OPI facilitator assigned in San Isidro, emphasized that one of his major takeaways from this project was that people’s interest, openness, and participation in any endeavor can be gained if they are truly affected by the situation they address. However, sustaining their interest and building deeper commitment will take a lot of time and patience from the side of the facilitator. Thus, the facilitator’s commitment needs to be developed first before anything else.

Conclusion

The success of SIKAP’s initiative is rooted in the group’s dedication toward regenerating their natural environment, and the community-led processes. OPI practitioners introduced to the group have provided SIKAP with the organizational tools and infrastructure to turn their dedication into impactful and sustainable change. It is these processes, we argue, that are essential to ensure the sustainability of climate-related interventions. Project sustainability is closely linked to local-level vision, planning, and ownership and depends upon strong social networks, such as those SIKAP has developed.

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