

RETURNING TO THE VISION WITH COMMUNITY ACTION PLANS



After a community has successfully harmonized its boundaries, adopted its by-laws, elected its Land Governance Council, and received formal documentation of its land rights, facilitators should facilitate a final (or near-final) community meeting designed to help the community identify practical next steps for turning its community vision into reality.¹ During this meeting, facilitators support the community to complete a short exercise in participatory, community-driven planning that culminates in the development of a basic community action plan.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN AND HOW IS IT USEFUL FOR COMMUNITIES?

A community action plan:

1. Articulates clear, specific goals that the community wants to achieve within a particular timeframe, and
2. Identifies how the community will take action on its priority goals.

An action plan can help a community to:

- **Decide how to work toward its future vision:** A well-crafted community action plan provides clear, practical and achievable steps toward the realization of a community's vision. It also helps a community to decide how to best allocate scarce resources (such as land, materials, time, money, and skills) so as to achieve its goals.

- **Come to agreement on future priorities:** Communities are diverse; different stakeholders may have very different ideas about what is best for the community's future. A community planning process can help communities work through differences and arrive at productive compromises that ensure all groups' interests are represented in community development actions.
- **Support good management of community lands and natural resources and protect the interests of future generations:** Community action plans, like zoning plans, can help communities make wise decisions about how to use their lands and natural resources fairly and sustainably.
- **Negotiate more powerfully with potential investors:** A community action plan, linked with maps and by-laws, can make clear to investors and government officials that the community has its own priorities and vision for its future and that any external investments must conform with – or support – the community's goals and plan.

1. If a community desires to undertake a more extensive community planning process, facilitating organizations can support the community to connect with another organization that specializes in community development planning. Alternatively, if a community wants or needs to spend more time on its plan, facilitators can train the Community Land Mobilizers and Land Governance Council on the steps to make a plan and use the first community planning meeting to introduce the steps, get the process started, and agree on a schedule for the community to complete the plan, supported by its Mobilizers and Council members.

HOW TO FACILITATE A SIMPLE COMMUNITY PLANNING PROCESS?

While community planning processes are usually lengthy and intensive efforts, facilitators may be able to leverage all the work that a community has already done on its vision, by-laws, and zoning plan to create a simple community action plan in a single meeting. In preparation for the meeting, facilitators should:

- Check for any **existing regional development plans made by the government** that apply to the community’s larger region. Knowledge of an existing regional plan can inform the community’s planning process by helping to:
 - Avoid contradictions between the community’s action plan and larger regional or national plans and
 - Support communities to strategically integrate their action plans into the larger regional plan. (For example, if a community wants to build a road in a certain location, but inspection of a regional plan indicates that the district government has already planned to build a road in that place, the community can choose to focus its efforts on other priorities.)
- Ask the Community Land Mobilizers and Land Governance Council to mobilize women, men, elders, youth, leaders, and members of minority groups to attend the meeting and take part actively in all discussions.

Then, at the meeting, facilitators should support communities through the following process:

Step 1: Revisit the community’s vision. In a community-wide meeting, ask the community to revisit its original vision, made in the first months of the community land protection process (the community should have kept the notes of its vision and facilitators should have taken a photograph or made copies of the notes). The community should read its original vision aloud and remember its original motivations.

Step 2: Explain how to make a community action plan. Facilitators and Community Land Mobilizers should introduce the concept of a community action plan, explain why it is important to have one, and describe the steps necessary to agree on a plan.

Step 3: Support the community to decide on a timeframe for its action plan. Action plan timeframes can be fairly short (2-5 years) or very long (20 years or more), depending on the community’s goals. Alternatively, a community may decide to create a plan with two parts, one for short-term goals and one for long-term goals.

Step 4: Brainstorm an all-inclusive list of clear, specific goals.

Ask community members to reflect on their community vision and “shout out” specific things that would help them to move toward their vision within the agreed-upon timeframe. Below are two examples of how to translate the vision into concrete goal statements:

VISION	GOAL STATEMENT
“A flourishing, healthy forest!”	→ “Our forest area will be larger and contain more wild fruit-bearing trees.”
“Enough water for everyone!”	→ “The water levels in our wells will be higher.”

Remind participants that all ideas are valid and that no one’s ideas should be silenced. While it is not possible to pursue every goal, a vibrant brainstorming session will help a community to arrive at the best plan. During the discussion, facilitators should guide community members to remain realistic about what the community can achieve within the plans’ agreed timeframe. Without being discouraging, facilitators can ask questions like:

- Is this something that the community can achieve on its own, or is it beyond the community’s control?
- Would this require a great deal of outside resources that may be hard to access?
- How can this goal be made more achievable, using the community’s existing resources?
- Is there a smaller version of the idea, or an intermediate step that would be more achievable during the timeframe of the plan?

If an idea conflicts with a part of the vision, such as a proposal for a business that could cause pollution, facilitators should support the community to assess the potential benefits and negative impacts of the idea and modify it accordingly.

Step 5: Group similar goals. Ask community members to group similar goals together in order to shorten the list to a manageable size. If several ideas are easily compatible, try to group them together. For example:

“Plant 50 trees” → “Plant 50 trees, 15 of which are
 “Have more wild fruit trees” fruit-bearing.”

“Build a better school” → “Make improvements to the
 “Make a garden for the school” school, including a garden and a new building.”

Step 6: Create a short list of priority goals. A planning process can be invigorating, as community members get excited about taking steps to make their future vision a reality. However, a very long list of goals and ideas will not be helpful unless priorities are established and decisions made about what actions be undertaken first. Facilitators should support the community to choose a short list of priority goals that it will work to achieve, before moving on to the others.

To do this:

- **Explain the need to prioritize.** Ask the community to reflect on its long list of goals. Explain that all the goals discussed will be recorded and worked toward, but that for practical purposes it is necessary to decide which goals should receive attention, effort and resources first. Start a new list, entitled “Priority Goals.”
- **Identify goals that are urgent and/or serious.** Ask the community if there are any goals that should be prioritized because they are time sensitive or because they are responding to current problems that will have serious negative impacts if they are not addressed quickly. Add these goals to the Priority Goals list and cross them off the original list. For example:
 - A serious goal could be stopping cattle from polluting the community’s drinking water because it is making people sick
 - An urgent goal could be getting a new roof on the local school before the rainy season begins.

- **Identify several “quick wins.”** Next, identify at least one goal that the community can achieve very easily (a “low-hanging fruit”). Easily-accomplished goals will create tangible local improvements quickly, boosting confidence and increasing community momentum for working on the remaining Priority Goals. “Quick wins” often have a short timeframe, rely on few external resources, and are simple to implement. Add these to the Priority Goals list and cross them off the original list.

Choosing priorities may be controversial, especially if people have competing interests. Prepare for disagreement by reminding community members about their ground rules and encourage people to explain and discuss differences in opinion. If some ideas are contentious, it may be best to record these with some type of symbol like “?” or list them on a separate sheet of paper until there is more agreement.

Step 7: Vote to choose among the remaining goals. Ask the community how many more goals should be included on the Priority Goals list for this plan. To ensure the list is achievable, facilitators should suggest that communities choose no more than 15 priority goals to focus on per plan.

- If the community decides that it has the capacity to achieve the Priority Goals already on the list plus five additional goals, explain that each community member can have five “votes” to cast among the remaining list of goals. Ask people to plan carefully how they want to “spend” their votes, and to watch to make sure that everyone else “spends” no more than the maximum number of votes.
- Give people a few minutes to look at the list of remaining goals, or have the remaining goals on the list read aloud. Remind everyone to choose goals that will benefit the entire community and lead to community-wide prosperity and wellness.
- Read the list aloud. For each goal, ask people to vote for whether it should be a priority goal. Count the number of votes and write down the number next to the goal.
- Add the goals that received the most votes to the remaining spaces on the Priority Goals list.

Voting is a simple way for a group to identify the most popular priorities. However, facilitators should remember two weaknesses of ranking by public vote:

1. Minority voices may be swamped by the majority.
2. Some participants, such as wives and youth, may choose their votes based on the choices of the head of their family or other powerful relations.

To address these concerns, facilitators may want to suggest the following strategies:

- Separate the meeting into groups of women, men and youth to do the voting, then add the votes together after the groups reconvene.
- Record details about the voting, such as the number of men/women/youth/elders (or other groups) who vote for an item, in order to identify if the sub-groups have different priorities.
- Use anonymous or near-anonymous voting procedures, such as closed eye, secret ballots, or having people come up to the lists and place a fixed number of dots or stickers next to the items that they want to vote for.
- Allow individuals to use multiple votes on a single item if it is very important to them, for example people could hold up 3 fingers to indicate that they want to use 3 of their 5 votes on the item in question.

- **Reflect on the results.** Ask the group whether there are concerns or suggestions for slight revisions to the list of Priority Goals. For any remaining goals that were not chosen as Priority Goals for this plan, copy them to a new piece of paper titled “Other Goals” so that they are recorded for future community planning discussions.

Step 8: Brainstorm and agree on actions that the community will take to achieve each Priority Goal. Moving from goals to action requires: the articulation of clear, practical, specific steps; identification of who will be responsible for completing each step; and determination of a final date by which they must complete each step and achieve the goal. Take the community through the list of Priority Goals one more time. For each goal, ask the community to discuss, decide and write down for its records answers to the following questions:

- **What actions can the community take to reach this goal?**
Encourage the community to brainstorm specific “next steps” and actions to reach each goal. Remind community members that not all actions need to be physical changes (such as building new infrastructure or planting trees); actions can also include administrative changes (such as adding a rule to the by-laws), governance changes (such as creating a new volunteer group to monitor a particular resource), or social actions or events (like holding more community celebrations or organizing dance competitions).
- **What obstacles may prevent or slow progress on this goal?**
Encourage the community to think about what challenges may threaten the successful realization of the goal, then proactively plan for how to address each challenge and avoid potential obstacles.
- **What resources and skills are needed?** Communities are diverse — every community includes people with various skill sets and expertise. Rather than immediately looking outside for help, support the community to brainstorm a list of skills that community members already have that could support the goal (such as carpenters, masons, artists, etc.). Only after listing all internal resources should communities think about external resources that they may need to access to achieve their goals.

- Who is responsible for overseeing the achievement of each goal?** A community goal may be complex and multi-faceted. To ensure that efforts progress in an orderly, thoughtful manner, the community should choose a “goal manager” or group of “goal managers” to be responsible and accountable for making progress toward achieving the goal. The goal manager(s) should coordinate the efforts of all other community members who are contributing to the goal. For example, if a community has a priority goal of building a new school, the goal manager may need to coordinate, direct and supervise the masons building the foundation and the carpenters building the roof and furniture. To support such efforts, the goal manager(s) should make a more detailed action plan that includes a work plan, timeline, list of people who will need to be involved, and a budget. The community may want to require that the community, Land Governance Council or other community leader(s) approve these specific action plans.
- How will the community know when it has achieved each goal?** Communities should identify ways to track and report on their progress toward each goal. Successes can be acknowledged and celebrated in community meetings, as radio announcements, or in ceremonies commemorating a group’s efforts.

Step 9: Agree on a schedule for reviewing progress and revising the community action plan. Action plans only have impact if they are made “real” through practical effort. The community should agree to regularly discuss progress made (for example, at a special “action plan progress meeting” held every quarter or bi-annually). These progress review meetings can help to hold people accountable for completing their agreed-upon tasks and may be a time to celebrate victories, resolve conflicts and obstacles, and adjust plans as necessary to meet evolving circumstances. Regular reviews of a plan also help motivate people and maintain momentum.

Step 10: Adopt the community action plan. The community should decide how to finalize and formally adopt its action plan. The community members could decide to:

- Adopt their action plan in the same meeting they drafted it in (if there is a large, representative group);
- Organize another community meeting to review and adopt it;
- Have the Community Land Mobilizers circulate copies throughout the community and collect feedback;
- Have the Land Governance Council adopt it;
- Or any other strategy that will ensure community-wide endorsement.

When facilitators periodically visit communities to check on their long-term governance and management of local lands and natural resources, they might also support each community to assess its progress toward the realization of its action plan, celebrate achievements, and support the community to overcome challenges.

NOTES