

Sustainable Community Development Step 2: Conduct a Community Assessment¹

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Overview

This document explains why it is important to conduct a community assessment during a sustainability project as well as gives guidelines and suggestions about where to obtain needed information.

Conduct a Community Assessment

A community assessment helps lay the groundwork for a sustainability project by providing information on the status and availability of resources and by identifying and prioritizing problems to address. Filling out a table like the sample table, listing community strengths, weaknesses, resources, limitations, opportunities, and barriers, may assist you to identify those issues of greatest concern for which data should be collected while allowing you to assess the resources at your disposal and the potential challenges faced. (See Table 1 for Sample Table and Table 2 for a table to fill out.)

Begin by gathering baseline data on those issues your community identifies as high priorities. It is often essential to step into the community's routines in order to gather information from the stakeholders themselves. Visit the local diner, a barber shop, coop, an extension meeting, gardening club, Kiwanas meeting and/or other routine gatherings of community members.

The information from the community assessment will later be used for measuring progress and can help identify the key goals of a sustainability campaign. It is advised that community assessments be performed periodically throughout the life of the sustainability project to assess the changing needs and assets of the community.

The information for a community assessment can come from many sources, including interviews, focus groups, and print, electronic, and other media. Often a literature review provides a solid foundation upon which your project can build. Researching other communities that have undertaken sustainable community initiatives will expose your team to the varying approaches taken and the successes and failures achieved.

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Table 1.

Strengths: <i>Low population density</i> <i>No long-term debt</i>	Weaknesses: <i>Aquifer contamination</i> <i>High poverty rate</i>
Resources: <i>Large land area</i> <i>Historic downtown</i>	Limitations: <i>Outdated technology</i> <i>Limited budget</i>
Opportunities: <i>Room for "smart growth"</i> <i>Agro-tourism potential</i>	Barriers: <i>Lack of civic participation</i> <i>Short-sighted development</i>

Table 2.

Strengths: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Weaknesses: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
Resources: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Limitations: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
Opportunities: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Barriers: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
Community: _____	Date of Assessment: _____

The following guide for obtaining local information focuses on print and electronic data sources. While emphasizing Florida, it also provides resources that are applicable to researching other areas of the country.

- Look at archives and recent issues of local newspapers and other periodicals.
- *National Register of Historic Places in Florida:* Search for historic places by county.

Background And Historical Information:

- Search the community's local library for planning commission documents, directories, and local histories.

Government:

- Refer to phone books to find federal, state, and local offices in the area.
- Visit the local City Hall for government records, maps, and comprehensive plans.

- *1997 Census of Government* provides information on government expenditures down to the county level. (<http://www.census.gov/govs/www/>)
- *The Florida Government Information Locator Service* is a catalog of local and federal government information available on the Internet and beyond. (<http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/fgils/>)

Demographics:

- *Census 2000*: US American FactFinder provides Census 2000 data to the block level. (<http://www.census.gov/>)
- *Government Information Sharing Projects USA Counties 1998*: Compiles useful demographic, economic, and governmental information spanning several years and sources for county comparisons and profiles. (<http://govinfo.kerr.orst.edu/>)

Crime And Justice:

- *US Department of Justices Bureau of Justice Statistics*: Provides state-level statistics on crime and victims. (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/>)
- *Florida Department of Law Enforcements Florida Statistical Analysis Center*: Provides crime date and trends. (<http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/FSAC/>)
- *Florida Correction Commissions Criminal Justice Links*: Provides a directory of local police departments. (<http://www.fcc.state.fl.us/fcc/justice/pdlinks.html>)

Economy:

- *US Census Bureaus Economic Census Profiles*: Provides economic and business data to the zip code level. (<http://www.census.gov/epcd/www/econ97.html>)
- *Government Information Sharing Projects Regional Economic Information System*: Presents estimates of personal income and per capita personal income for 1969-1997. (<http://www.econdata.net/>)

- *US Department of Labors Bureau of Labor Statistics*: Includes regional wage data, state and local wages, unemployment rates, and additional economic information. (<http://stats.bls.gov/>)
- *Census of Agriculture*: Provides a complete picture of the agricultural sector in the U.S. economy by county, state, or ZIP code. (<http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/>)
- *Florida Agricultural Statistics Service*: Provides information on Florida aquaculture, citrus, economics, field crops, horticulture, livestock, poultry, and vegetables. (<http://www.nass.usda.gov/fl/>)
- *Florida Research and Economic Database*: This database from the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation provides economic indicators at the county and metropolitan area levels. (<http://fred.labormarketinfo.com/>)
- *Florida Statistical Abstracts*: This reference book, compiled annually by the University of Florida's Bureau of Economic Business Research, provides economic and demographic data about Florida. University of Florida, Bureau of Economic and Business Research, 221 Matherly Hall, Gainesville 32611-7145, 352-392-0171.

Education:

- *National Center for Education Statistics*: Includes information on public schools, school district finances comparisons, and school district demographics. (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)
- *Florida Department of Educations Florida School Indicators Report*: Provides data on public elementary, middle, and high schools for each of Floridas 67 school districts and provides numerous indicators of school status and performance. (<http://info.doe.state.fl.us/fsir/>)

Environment:

- *EPAs Search Your Community*: Allows you to enter your zip code and choose from four databases to retrieve environmental information about your community. (<http://www.epa.gov/epahome/commsearch.htm>)

- *EPAs Search Your Watershed*: Search for citizen-based groups working on your watershed conservation efforts and other environmental information. (<http://www.epa.gov/surf/>)
- *Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission*: List of endangered species, threatened species and species of special concern. (<http://floridaconservation.org/>)
- *Florida Department of Environmental Protections Geologic Survey*: Includes county and state maps and GIS data. (<http://www.dep.state.fl.us/geology/>)
- *Florida Department of Transportations Traffic Data*: Transportation Statistics Office reports on annual average daily traffic (AADT) by county for every segment of Floridas State Highway System. (<http://www.dot.state.fl.us/planning/statistics/default.htm>)
- *University of Florida's Geographic Data Library*: Provides free geographic data to download. (<http://www.fgdl.org/>)
- *Directories or inventories of agencies*: Available at public libraries, cooperative extension offices, mental health centers and United Way offices.
- *Surveys of community-based organizations* (YWCA's, YMCAs, churches, cultural organizations, non-profits, etc.).

Health And Social Services:

- *FL Department of Health Public Health Indicators Data System*: This system allows you to access current public health indicator data and create your own custom reports. (<http://www.doh.state.fl.us/>)
- *FL Department of Health Vital Statistics Annual Reports*: Include records of live births, deaths, fetal deaths, marriages, and dissolutions of marriages. (<http://taxonomy.myflorida.com/Taxonomy/Floridian/Communities>)
- *Florida Department of Health Vital Statistics*: Provides information on births, deaths, marriages, and divorces.
- *Kids Count*: This project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the U.S. by providing benchmarks of child well-being. (<http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/databook/>)