

# Advancing Social Equity as an Integral Dimension of Sustainability in Local Communities

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## Abstract

*Sustainability has been viewed as a commitment to protection of the environment, responsible economic growth, and promotion of equity—the well-known three “Es.” The third “E,” however, is not as well understood or promoted as the other two. This article considers what equity means as a dimension of sustainability and examines what local governments are doing to advance social equity. Reviewing the results of a national survey in 2010 made it evident that most cities and counties are doing little related to equity. A followup survey was conducted involving two groups of governments identified in that survey—one group was active in social equity and a second was active in sustainability overall but was doing little related to equity. The results reveal the widespread differences between the goals and agendas pursued by the two groups of governments. From the survey respondents, nine governments with broad-ranging activities to promote equity were identified to be the subjects of case studies. Engaging citizens, cooperation between cities and counties, partnerships with nonprofit organizations, and recognition of the value of diversity were qualities shared by the governments in the case studies. Building on and expanding the theme of the livable cities initiative sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Environmental Protection Agency, and U.S. Department of Transportation, the research indicates that sustainability entails efforts to improve the livability of communities in the present and to build the social, environmental, and economic viability of communities for the long term.*

## Introduction

Since the 1980s, sustainability—defined as measures to protect and enhance the environment, the economy, and equity for current residents and future generations—has become an issue of increasing importance both domestically and internationally. In the past decade, local governments in the United States have demonstrated increasing leadership in this area. Some exemplary local government officials have worked in partnership with businesses, nonprofit organizations, community organizations, and residents to collaboratively develop programs to create more vibrant, resilient communities. With these collaborative initiatives as the locus of most of the sustainability activity in the United States, it is important to increase our understanding about how local governments articulate the connection between equity and other dimensions of sustainability. A comprehensive approach to achieving sustainability should address the “three Es”—environment, economy, and equity—but in practice, the equity dimension often receives less attention and may not even be incorporated in a government’s sustainability program.

In 2010, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) conducted its Local Government Sustainability Policies and Programs Survey and found that most local governments were still in the early stages of addressing sustainability. Most placed emphasis on long-standing areas of commitment, such as recycling and the environment, and also on new areas, such as energy conservation, but only a minority of governments had developed comprehensive sustainability programs (Svara, Read, and Moulder, 2011). Few local governments were adopting measures to promote social equity. Without a strong commitment to social equity, local governments have moved only part of the way to achieving true sustainability. The experience of American urban areas shows that inequality and social exclusion are not sustainable practices, because they undermine the viability of communities. Thus, communities may have programs that protect the natural environment, reduce energy use, and address other aspects of sustainability, but without programs to promote social equity, they are not strengthening their social foundation for long-term viability.

Our research examines the definition of social equity, the level of commitment of local governments in addressing equity issues, and the extent to which social equity activities are included within an integrated approach to sustainability. Social equity means redressing injustices and remediating damages that were previously incurred, fully incorporating all segments of the community in the political decisionmaking process, and establishing measures to prevent future inequities from occurring (Johnson and Svara, 2011). Such efforts include expanding opportunity and promoting equal access to public services, providing equal service quality, ensuring procedural fairness, and striving for equal opportunity in such areas as education, health, and employment. The social equity dimension of sustainability refers to how burdens and benefits of different policy actions are distributed in a community. The more evenly they are distributed, the more equitable the community is, and this even distribution is reflected in economic, ecologic, and social outcomes.

This article describes the current activities, leading practices, and achievements of communities that seek to achieve true sustainability. It is a summary of the full report *Local Governments, Social Equity, and Sustainable Communities* (ICMA, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Such communities were created through a

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<sup>1</sup> The full report and accompanying case studies are available for free download at [http://icma.org/en/results/sustainable\\_communities/projects/advancing\\_social\\_equity\\_goals\\_to\\_achieve\\_sustainability](http://icma.org/en/results/sustainable_communities/projects/advancing_social_equity_goals_to_achieve_sustainability).

comprehensive, integrated approach to sustainability supported by inclusive engagement, equal access to services, and livable neighborhoods. Our analysis examines all local governments that responded to the ICMA 2010 survey, focusing in particular on the characteristics of the minority of governments—fewer than 1 in 10—that are very active in social equity. Using additional information from a followup survey conducted in 2012, the analysis explores the adoption of a wider range of equity activities. From these surveys, nine local governments were identified for indepth examination as case studies.

Many communities (both surveyed and selected for case study) have an extensive range of sustainability activities that address social equity concerns, such as affordable housing programs, wellness initiatives, preschool programs, and actions to promote job creation. We find it surprising, however, that few of these governments are organizing and resourcing their sustainability initiatives in a coordinated manner or through a comprehensive approach that addresses social equity issues as an integrated part of their sustainability strategies. Even governments that have extensive activities that promote social equity may not see them as part of sustainability.

The conclusion of this study describes alternative explanations for the interconnection of equity and sustainability and suggests approaches for expanding equity and integrating it with other components of a community's sustainability program. Some governments make an open, comprehensive commitment to sustainability that fully incorporates social inclusion and opportunity for all members of the community, and they support that commitment with planning and assessment. Other governments may want to avoid the possibly contentious ideas of sustainability or equity or simply do not see how equity relates to sustainability. These governments may want to stress the key qualities and values that sustainability promotes: livability for all residents and long-term viability for the community as a whole. These governments could identify the activities needed to achieve livability and viability and measure the progress in realizing them. Their approach would be consistent with general definitions of sustainability, but it focuses on the special conditions of local governments as opposed to stressing broader issues, such as climate change.

The key point for promoting social equity activities is that exclusion and inequality are not sustainable practices. Put simply, we're all in this together; that is, we are mutually dependent economically, socially, and environmentally. If we want livable and viable communities, we must pursue a comprehensive approach to sustainability that includes social equity.

## **Methodology**

This study examines the results of a national survey of the full range of local governments' sustainability activities conducted by ICMA in 2010 with 2,176 responding governments. It also draws on a 2012 followup survey of 300 selected governments that focuses exclusively on social equity activities. The initial survey provided some insights about the extent of social equity activity as part of the overall sustainability program in local governments. Analysis of the 2010 survey examines variation in the use of 10 activities related to social equity and identifies the kinds of governments that have adopted most of these activities (high-equity governments), and these governments were surveyed again in 2012 to get more information about their equity activities. The 2010 survey indicated that governments that have little or no involvement in equity programs are also not likely

to be active in sustainability in general; however, identified among the 2010 survey respondents was a group of local governments that are active in sustainability in general but do little related to equity (low-equity governments). These governments were surveyed as well in 2012 and serve as a comparison group. We examine the similarities and differences between these high- and low-equity governments based on the 2010 survey.

From the respondents to the 2012 survey, nine local governments were selected to be case studies. The case studies provide additional information about the range of activities and the involvement of governmental and community organizations to support them. Furthermore, the interviews and reviews of documents in each case-study site were examined for explanations of the rationale for the sustainability program and the extent to which social equity is incorporated in the overall approach. The results show that some governments have fully integrated many equity activities into their sustainability programs, whereas others have active sustainability programs and extensive social equity activities but make little connection between them. This article examines the implications of these different approaches.

## **2010 ICMA Survey Results**

In the summer of 2010, a national survey was sent to 8,569 local governments with populations more than 2,500 examining what they were doing to promote sustainability (Svara, 2011; Svara, Watt, and Jang, 2013). The survey had a 25-percent response rate with 2,176 local governments responding. The survey contained questions about 109 sustainability activities in 12 major categories: (1) recycling, (2) water conservation, (3) transportation improvements, (4) energy use in transportation and lighting, (5) social inclusion, (6) building energy use, (7) local production and green purchasing, (8) land conservation and development rights, (9) greenhouse gas reduction and air quality, (10) building and land use regulations, (11) workplace alternatives to reduce commuting, and (12) alternative energy generation. The social inclusion category directly relates to social equity, and a few other specific activities in other categories are also relevant to equity (see discussion that follows). The overall finding from this survey was that most local governments generally participate in long-standing activities such as recycling, expanding biking-walking trails, sidewalks that support farmers' markets, and activities that provide immediate budgetary benefits, such as reducing energy costs. Less than one-half, but more than one-third, plan for tree preservation and planting, purchase energy-efficient vehicles, have zoning codes to encourage more mixed-use development, act to conserve the quantity of water from aquifers, use water pricing to encourage conservation, adopt zoning codes to encourage mixed-use development, and provide financial support or incentives for affordable housing—the only practice used by one-third or more of government that directly addresses social equity concerns. Less than one-third are taking on well-established practices to advance sustainability such as land conservation, weatherization, higher density development, and measuring greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, few governments are taking advantage of more innovative approaches, such as use of solar power, reclamation of grey water, and alternative work schedules for government employees (Svara, 2011).

Support for the triple bottom line, focusing on environmental, economic, and equity concerns, was measured with questions about the extent to which various policy issues are priorities in the community. Of the respondents—

- 94 percent said the economy was a very high or high priority.
- 62 percent considered the environment a priority (70 percent of respondents called energy conservation a priority but only 19 percent assigned high-priority status to climate change).
- 38 percent considered social justice to be a priority, although support for affordable housing was more widespread (48 percent) as a policy priority.

The lower acceptance for some of these priorities reflects political controversy associated with them—in particular, climate change and social justice. (A wider range of priorities was examined in the 2012 survey.) Still, for most survey respondents, the triple bottom line was not addressed in an even manner, and a clear hierarchy in priorities emerged. The economy is by far the highest priority for local governments.

Some local governments are pursuing overall sustainability-related goals to an exceptional degree, but, on average, local governments are using only 18 percent of the surveyed sustainability activities. The pattern of adoption for most innovations reflects a normal distribution, with most governments in the middle with moderate rates of adoption and smaller numbers at the leading and trailing edges of adoption in a bell-shaped curve (Nelson and Svara, 2011). For sustainability activities, however, the distribution of ratings (the percentage of total sustainability practices adopted) is skewed toward the low end of the scale, as shown in exhibit 1. Most governments rank below the average adoption rating of 18 percent. The 2010 survey results indicate potential for a substantial increase in sustainability activity if most governments were to “catch up” and move toward the middle of the distribution.

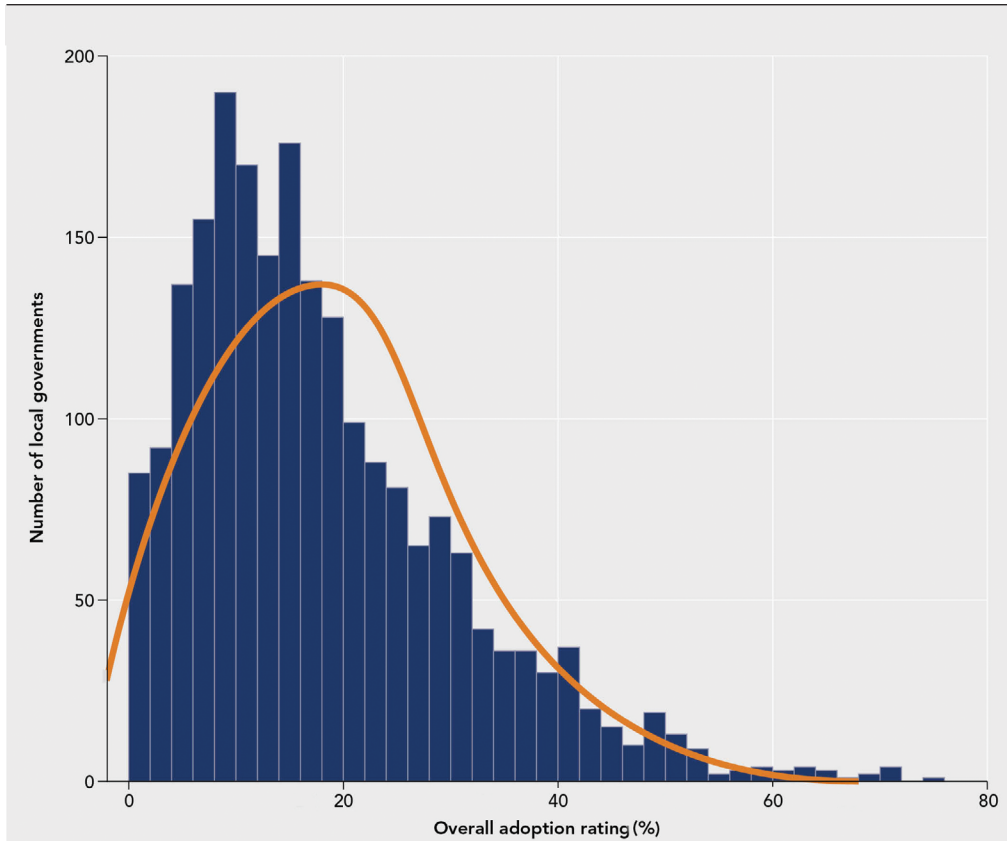
A number of factors are related to the level of total sustainability adoptions. Local governments that use the council-manager form of government and are located in Western states have higher ratings, and the adoption rate increases with higher population (Svara, Watt, and Jang, 2013). Significant but weaker relationships are found with a younger population, higher education level, lower income, and higher housing value, and sustainability ratings increase as the White population percentage increases. Demographic and socioeconomic status characteristics make a difference, but not a substantial one when examining the overall level of sustainability activity undertaken by local governments.

Additional analysis has been conducted on an expanded social equity index drawn from the 2010 survey using the seven items in the social inclusion category plus three additional activities related to transportation and subsidies for residential energy conservation included in other categories. The activities and the percentage of governments adopting each are listed in exhibit 2.

The average number of these activities adopted by the responding government in 2010 is 2 out of 10, although variation exists based on the characteristics of the local government. When the distribution of local governments is arranged by the number of social equity activities they have adopted, the pattern is similar to the one that appears in exhibit 1, but it is even more skewed toward the low end. As indicated in exhibit 3, more than one-third of these local governments are not providing any of the programs that address social equity concerns of unequal access or opportunity.

**Exhibit 1**

Distribution of Sustainability Ratings



Source: Svara (2011: 46)

**Exhibit 2**

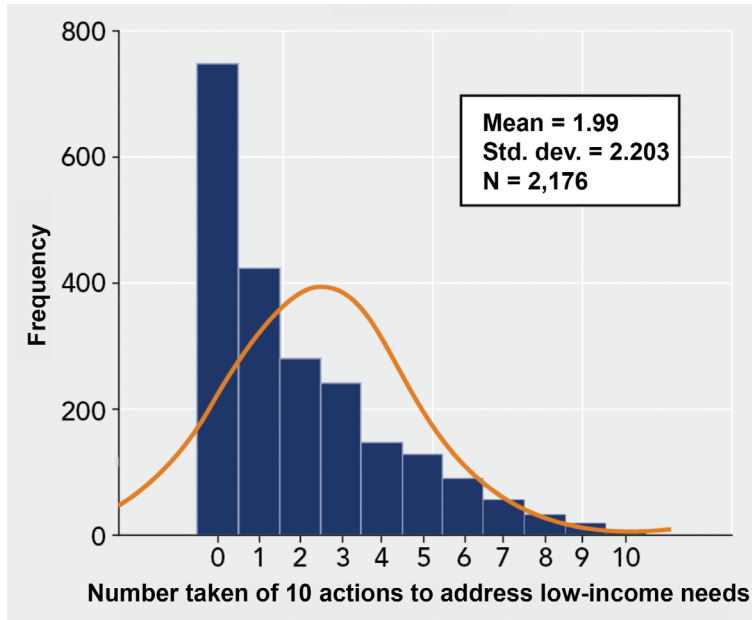
Activities That Promote Social Equity

Activity	Percent Adopting
Provide financial support or incentives for affordable housing <sup>a</sup>	33
Provide access to information technology for people without connection <sup>a</sup>	27
Provide housing options for elderly people <sup>a</sup>	27
Provide after-school programs for children <sup>a</sup>	26
Expand bus routes	22
Provide transportation programs specifically targeted to assist low-income residents	21
Provide supportive housing to people with disabilities <sup>a</sup>	15
Provide funding for preschool education <sup>a</sup>	12
Provide housing within the community to homeless people <sup>a</sup>	10
Provide energy-reduction programs specifically targeted to assist low-income residents	8
<b>Mean number of 10 activities</b>	<b>2</b>

<sup>a</sup> Items in the original social inclusion category.

**Exhibit 3**

**Level of Social Equity Action**



*Std. dev.* = standard deviation.

The factors related to the social equity index score for all responding governments in general are similar to those for sustainability ratings. Council-manager form of government, Western states, higher population, and more educated population are positively related to social equity adoptions and negatively related to population age and income level. Race and ethnicity are not related to social equity level for all governments. The results indicate that certain governments are “predisposed” to include social equity in their sustainability programs. In communities that do not have these characteristics, proponents of social equity need to present the issue of equity in such a way as to increase the likelihood of building support.<sup>2</sup> As discussed later in this article, alternative ways exist to describe how equity relates to sustainability and one approach to illustrating this relationship may be received more favorably than another depending on the disposition of the community.

Strong correlation of data is evident across all the sustainability activities, so governments that do more on social equity are likely to be more active in sustainability in general. As noted, the factors related to higher ratings on both the overall sustainability and the social equity scales are similar. Additional analysis of the 2010 survey results was conducted to compare governments that had high ratings on sustainability but low scores of social equity. The governments assigned to the high-equity group of governments were engaged in at least 6 of the 10 activities in exhibit 2 and

<sup>2</sup> Finding appropriate ways to frame the issue is important in all communities. For example, the advantage of promoting equity in a larger council-manager city in the West is that that area of the country has more examples of other comparable cities that have already incorporated social equity in their sustainability programs than in governments with different characteristics. Still, finding the right way to promote the theme will be important to success.

totaled 200 governments, or 9.2 percent, of the responding governments. On the other hand, among governments with high scores on the overall sustainability ratings (in the upper 30th percentile of ratings), 227 governments had 2 equity actions or less. They were assigned to the low-equity group even though they are active in other areas of sustainability. Most of the higher sustainability/lower equity governments are cities (94 percent) with populations of under 50,000 (76 percent). To match the high-equity governments, a comparison group of 100 governments was selected.<sup>3</sup> The two groups are similar in the actions they have adopted outside of the equity areas. The high-equity group has adopted an average of 37 activities, while the low-equity group has adopted 34 activities.

It is important to know how the two groups compare in their characteristics. Do dramatically different types of governments take different paths when it comes to adopting measures to promote social equity? The analysis of differences used the same characteristics noted earlier. Two sets of factors lead to different expectations about which governments would be high and which would be low on equity. It might be expected from other research on policy choices that governments with higher minority populations and lower levels of socioeconomic status would be more likely to adopt equity measures. On the other hand, people with higher incomes and communities with more educated people and more young adults would be more likely to be innovative and take on new responsibilities. The results are presented in exhibit 4. As expected, the high-equity governments have higher minority populations and lower levels of education and income. The differences in housing value and percentage of young residents are not significant.

The differences in demographic and socioeconomic measures are modest. Although they have less potential social need than the high-equity governments, the low-equity governments still have 23 percent Black and Hispanic populations and 12 percent in poverty. Thus the low-equity governments have needs that are not being addressed to the extent that they are in the other cities. These governments are also smaller—with an average population of 106,510 compared with 201,307 in

**Exhibit 4**

**Comparison of Local Governments With High Social Equity Activity**

Comparison Groups of Governments		Black	Hispanic	Foreign Born	Bachelor Degree	Home-owner	Poverty	Age 25 to 44 Years	Median Housing Value
Low equity, high other areas of sustainability	Mean	8.87%	13.95%	11.11%	35.10%	65.65%	11.75%	26.61%	\$287,253.61
	n	91	91	91	90	90	91	83	84
High equity, high other areas of sustainability	Mean	12.01%	17.81%	13.68%	29.31%	60.31%	17.02%	26.95%	\$272,117.16
	n	178	178	178	178	177	178	139	140
Total	Mean	10.95%	16.50%	12.81%	31.26%	62.11%	15.24%	26.82%	\$277,793.33
	n	269	269	269	268	267	269	222	224
ANOVA significance		0.080	0.083	0.060	0.003	0.001	0.006	0.552	0.607

ANOVA = authors' Analysis of Variance.

<sup>3</sup> The governments selected were all 55 governments in localities of more than 50,000 in population and 45 governments chosen randomly in localities of less than 50,000 in population. For the comparison group, it was important not to compare primarily small low-equity governments with larger high-equity governments.



high-equity governments, as shown in exhibit 5. The difference, however, is caused in part because the low-equity cities include fewer counties that tend to have higher populations. When comparing the median populations for the two types of governments, however, the differences are small. In other words, one-half of the low-equity cities are under 46,483, and one-half of the high-equity cities are under 47,796 in population. The low-equity counties have higher mean and median populations.

Thus the data from the 2010 survey do not support the simplistic conclusion that high-equity governments are large and have high levels of social and economic need whereas low-equity governments (that are active in other areas of sustainability) are small, affluent, and homogenous. The high-equity communities have found ways to solidify support for social equity that is missing in the marginally, yet significantly different low-equity communities. Additional information was needed to measure the full scope of social equity activities in these two types of governments and the factors that support the stronger commitment to equity.

### Exhibit 5

#### Population Comparison

Comparison Groups of Governments	Population		
	Mean	Median	
Low equity, high other areas of sustainability	City (87%; n = 87)	67,460	46,483
	County (13%; n = 13)	367,849	264,063
	Total	106,510	53,429
High equity, high other areas of sustainability	City (78%; n = 156)	165,266	47,796
	County (22%; n = 44)	329,090	227,384
	Total	201,307	61,766

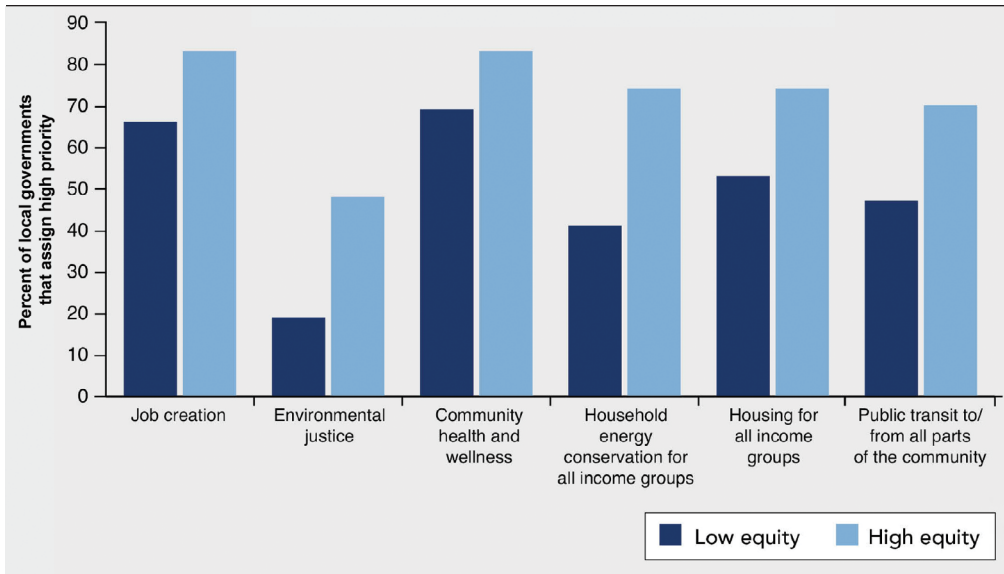
## 2012 Social Equity Survey Results

In 2012, a followup survey was sent to the 200 local governments that were found to be highly active in social equity in the first survey, as well as to a control group of 100 local governments that were identified as highly active in other sustainability activities but that reported low adoption of activities related to social equity. The purpose of the survey was to delve more deeply into the range of social equity-related activities that the two groups of local governments had adopted and examine how the two groups compare in policy priorities and approaches to organizing their sustainability programs. The response rate was 34 percent for both groups (68 respondents from the local high-equity governments and 34 respondents from the control group). Overall, in each section of the survey, the high-equity respondents showed higher percentages reporting a wider range of equity-related activities than did the low-equity respondents. In many instances, the differences were pronounced.

The two groups of governments had different policy priorities. As indicated in exhibit 6, the percentages of each group that assign a high level of priority to the issues presented, showed similarities and striking differences. As in the first survey, the high-equity governments are much more likely to place a high priority on environmental justice than are the low-equity governments. Still, even in the high-equity governments, fewer than one-half consider this issue to be a high-priority. Household energy conservation statistics reveal a big gap in the support for all income groups and

**Exhibit 6**

**Priority Assessment**



to public transit to and from all parts of the community. For these issues, however, a substantial minority of low-equity governments consider the issues to be important. The likelihood that these issues will be assigned a high priority shows little difference for the issues of job creation and community health and wellness. Thus, a possibility exists that support for equity activities can be mobilized around issues that command broader support—job creation and community health, as well as housing and public transit for all residents.

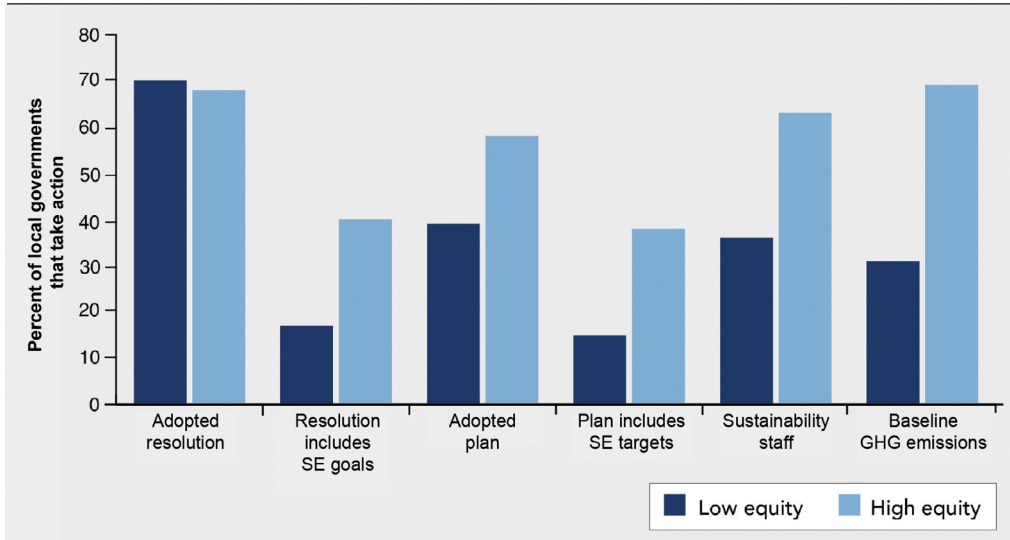
In high- and low-equity governments, approaches to organizing sustainability programs are virtually identical with regard to having a resolution to convey support for sustainability, as seen in exhibit 7. Approximately two-thirds of the governments in both groups have such a resolution, although the high-equity governments are much more likely to include social equity goals in the resolution. On the other measures of how the program is organized, however, substantial differences exist even if equity is not directly involved. High-equity governments are more likely to (1) have developed a plan that clearly articulates social equity goals, (2) commit adequate resources to implementing the plan, and (3) assign staff to administer it. They are also more than twice as likely to have determined baseline greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, those governments active in equity are more likely to commit more resources to sustainability and pursue a broader strategy that includes greenhouse gas emissions reduction. On the other hand, only two in five high-equity governments have explicit social equity goals and targets. Although these governments have extensive activities related to social equity, most have not articulated social equity goals within their sustainability plans.

Actions to reduce housing costs and expand housing options are an important element in social equity. Providing residential energy audits, weatherization to reduce energy use, and upgrades of residential heating and air conditioning systems reduce greenhouse gases and save money for

occupants. All three practices are more prevalent in high-equity communities, with weatherization assistance offered in more than three-fifths of these governments, as shown in exhibit 8. To encourage construction of affordable housing, 60 percent of high-equity governments provide incentives

### Exhibit 7

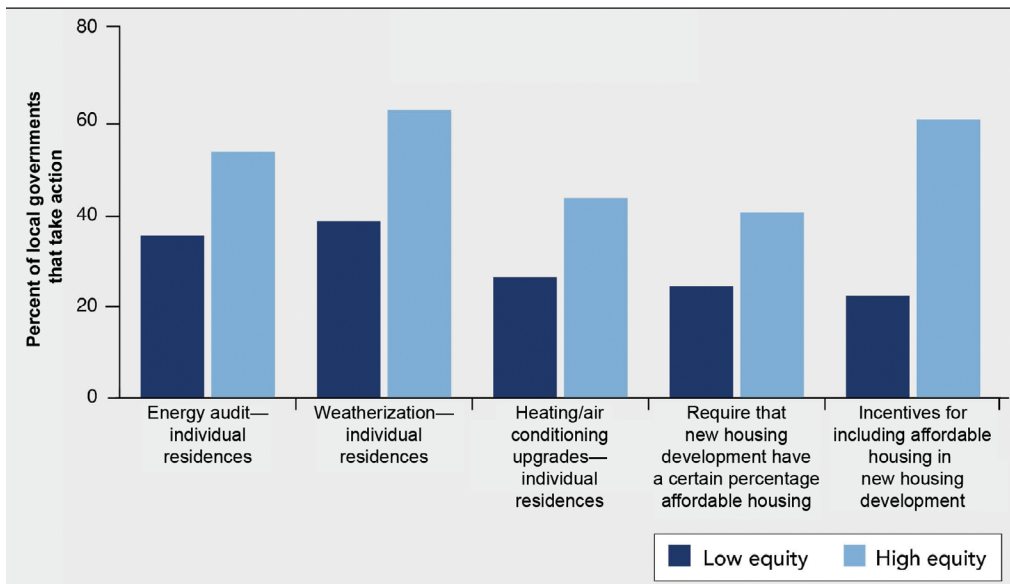
#### Organizing Sustainability Programs



GHG = greenhouse gas. SE = social equity.

### Exhibit 8

#### Support for Housing



compared with 22 percent of low-equity governments. Requiring that new housing complexes have affordable units is nearly twice as common in high-equity governments—but still only 40 percent of those governments have this kind of inclusionary zoning requirement.

Differences are not as pronounced in programs that focus on residential energy use. More than 3 in 10 of the low-equity governments conduct energy audits and support weatherization in individual residences. A wide range of services and facilities can be specialized to assist low-income residents. As shown in exhibit 9, all the services are more commonly provided in high-equity local governments, more than one-half of which provide facilities to receive social services, transportation to service locations, libraries, security programs (including community watch and community policing), efforts to reduce blight, and space for community gardens. More than 40 percent of

**Exhibit 9**

**Local Government Actions Targeted to Low-Income Populations**

Action	Equity Level	Percent Taking Action
Provide community wellness programs	Low	15
	High	41
Provide facilities to receive social services	Low	18
	High	56
Provide transportation from neighborhood to receive social services	Low	29
	High	57
Provide facilities to receive medical services	Low	9
	High	47
Locate library in neighborhood that is open during normal work hours	Low	32
	High	62
Locate library in neighborhood that is open in the evenings after normal work hours	Low	29
	High	58
Make efforts to promote security, such as community watch	Low	34
	High	60
Provide programs to reduce blight and graffiti	Low	26
	High	62
Make linkages between neighborhood residents and law enforcement, such as community policing	Low	47
	High	65
Provide space and support the development of community gardens	Low	32
	High	59
Provide space for farmers markets	Low	24
	High	47
Provide active brownfields, vacant property, or other program for revitalizing abandoned or underused residential, commercial, or industrial lands and buildings	Low	15
	High	31
Take other actions to rectify toxic air, water, or land pollution	Low	3
	High	21
Provide a land conservation program	Low	3
	High	29

governments offer community wellness programs, farmers' markets, and facilities to receive medical services. The most commonly provided service in low-equity communities is community policing, which is found in 47 percent of these governments.

Actions to expand job opportunities are also offered more commonly in high-equity communities, as shown in exhibit 10. Nearly all high-equity communities take actions to promote job creation, and this action is evident in 62 percent of the low-equity communities as well. Still, the high-equity communities are nearly twice as likely to develop "green jobs" and are much more likely to offer training and development programs to prepare for these jobs. Requirements for contractors to pay a living wage are used in fewer than one-half of the high-equity jurisdictions (38 percent), and these jurisdictions rarely require that health insurance be provided (5 percent).

A number of dimensions affect the extent to which individuals and groups are connected to the life of the community and are capable of being fully involved in political, social, and economic activities. Technology is increasingly becoming the channel for communication, but some residents are excluded from full participation by a digital divide caused by their lack of knowledge or resources to access the Internet. Most high-equity communities and more than one-half of the low-equity communities are offering services and facilities to provide training to expand technology skills and access to information technology, as shown in exhibit 11. Financial subsidies, however, are less common in both groups of governments. Community centers that offer educational and recreational programs and after-school programs are provided in both groups of communities surveyed, but they are more common in high-equity communities. The extent to which preschool is provided has a wide divergence (78 percent of high-equity compared with 29 percent of low-equity governments). One-half

## Exhibit 10

### Local Government Actions To Create Jobs

Action	Equity Level	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)
Actions to promote job creation	Low	62	38	0
	High	88	11	2
• If yes, have actions included development of "green jobs"?	Low	33	52	14
	High	64	27	9
Training and workforce development	Low	42	58	0
	High	72	23	5
• If yes, have actions included preparation for filling "green jobs"?	Low	36	50	14
	High	61	30	9
Requirement that contractors with local government provide a living wage for employees	Low	9	82	9
	High	38	53	10
Requirement that contractors with local government provide health insurance for employees	Low	3	87	10
	High	5	81	14

**Exhibit 11**

**Local Government Actions To Promote Social Inclusion**

Action	Equity Level	Percent Taking Action
Provide access to information technology for people without connection to the Internet	Low	59
	High	82
Provide training for community members interested in improving their technology skills	Low	53
	High	76
Provide assistance in accessing subsidies that may be available for low-income members of the community to obtain Internet access in their homes	Low	26
	High	40
Provide community center for educational and recreational purposes	Low	71
	High	93
Provide funding for preschool education	Low	29
	High	78
Provide after-school programs for children	Low	59
	High	87
Provide education on organic farming	Low	32
	High	50
Report on community quality of life indicators, such as education, cultural diversity, and social well-being	Low	44
	High	71

of the high-equity and one-third of the low-equity communities offer opportunities to learn about organic farming.<sup>4</sup> Finally, most of the high-equity communities report to the public on quality-of-life indicators in the community compared with less than one-half of the low-equity communities.

The 2012 followup survey results indicate that two overlapping groups of local governments approach social equity with different degrees of commitment despite that fact that both groups have active sustainability programs in areas other than social equity. The two groups were classified on the basis of their responses to the 2010 national survey, and their programs could have changed in the interval before the followup survey. The two groups are not complete opposites in their approaches. As the discussion of survey results indicates, some of the communities identified as high equity are not providing certain programs and services specifically related to social equity, whereas some communities in the low-equity group are doing so. More needs to be done to increase activities even in communities receptive to promoting social equity; these communities can expand and deepen their efforts.

Many communities in the low-equity group offer a number of programs that are related to equity, and they are active in efforts to improve the environment and economy. Thus, they have a foundation on which to build a comprehensive approach to sustainability. In addition, as noted at the beginning of the discussion of the 2012 survey, sizable minorities of these communities give high priority to job creation and health and wellness. These policy areas could provide the policy foundation for expanded equity activity. A comparison of the two groups' median housing values and

<sup>4</sup> As reported in exhibit 9, 59 percent of the high-equity governments provided space for community gardens compared with 32 percent of the low-equity governments. Urban farming has been an important element in the revitalization plans of jurisdictions that have experienced population declines, such as Detroit and Cleveland.

percentages of population in poverty presented in exhibit 4 suggests that the low-equity governments presumably have higher resources and lower social needs. Although the high-equity group has more large cities and more counties, both of which have access to a wider range of resources, the median populations for both groups are similar. As the case studies indicate, local governments with extensive activities in social equity have a strong commitment to addressing the needs and expanding the opportunities of vulnerable populations, and they are adept at involving residents and community organizations in their programs.

## Case Studies

Case studies were conducted in nine communities identified from the 2012 social equity followup survey for the purpose of gaining insights about how to strengthen the equity dimension of sustainability.<sup>5</sup> The communities studied were considered to be highly active in social equity. In selecting communities for case study, three major criteria were used: (1) a high level of social equity activities, (2) evidence that some practices of leading communities were being used, and (3) a diverse array of small to moderately large cities and counties would be included.<sup>6</sup> Out of 60 items in the followup survey that governments might include in their sustainability programs, the nine case-study communities reported that they provided from 37 to 54 of the items. Websites of possible case-study sites were reviewed to determine whether elements identified in the review of leading sustainability governments were present. The sites selected, however, reflected different approaches to organizing the sustainability program, planning, and incorporating social equity. One objective of the case studies was to assess whether these differences have any impact on the coherence and operation of the sustainability program and the commitment to social equity. Efforts were made to select a variety of sites from across regions of the country and population size. The nine case-study locations are listed in exhibit 12, which reveals the variations that exist between

### Exhibit 12

#### Comparison of Case-Study Communities

Community	Population	Poverty (%)	White (%)
<b>Cities</b>			
Dubuque, Iowa	57,637	11.8	90.2
Fort Collins, Colorado	143,986	17.2	89.0
Hayward, California	144,186	12.8	34.2
Lewiston, Maine	36,592	20.5	86.6
<b>Combined city/county program</b>			
Ann Arbor/Washtenaw County, Michigan	113,934/347,962	21.5	73.0
Arlington, Virginia <sup>a</sup>	207,627	7.1	77.3
Durham/Durham County, North Carolina	228,330/267,587	18.6	42.5
<b>Counties</b>			
Clark County, Washington	425,363	11.7	88.1
Manatee County, Florida	322,833	13.6	86.8

<sup>a</sup> Arlington is a county government that provides the full range of city services. The county contains no separate municipalities.

<sup>5</sup> No case studies on social equity were conducted after the 2010 survey.

<sup>6</sup> Practices of leading communities that incorporated equity into sustainability programs were identified from the 2010 ICMA Sustainability Survey, studies, and recognition by other sustainability-related programs.

the local governments studied. Included are cities, counties, and a combination of the two from states in the Northeast, Midwest, South, Mountain, and West Coast regions. The areas range in population from 36,592 to 425,363 and differ in their poverty rates and the racial diversity of their populations.

The case studies examine the action that has been taken by the local government(s) and timeline in which they were developed. In addition, the researchers sought to determine the purpose of the activities, the dynamics of the program(s), how the separate parts fit together, who contributes to the activities, what have they accomplished, and how the overall purpose of the program and the social equity component are defined and justified.

## **Key Observations From Case Studies**

From conducting case-study research in nine communities across the United States, several recurring findings serve as replicable best practices for other local governments seeking to strengthen the social dimension of their activities related to sustainability. Summary findings are presented here, and detailed examples are provided in the full report.

1. Inclusive citizen engagement has played a critical role in improving the quality of public projects, improving relationships between the public and city government, and increasing the overall quality of life for community residents.
  - Citizen engagement initiatives in Dubuque, Iowa, have enabled community leaders to identify local priorities and address critical challenges. The Sustainable Dubuque Collaboration was created in 2011 to carry on the goals of the original Sustainable Dubuque Task Force. It coordinates community engagement between participating organizational and individual members to achieve goals, collect data, and monitor progress.
  - Since the catalytic resistance of residents of Lewiston, Maine, to that city's 2004 Heritage Initiative and neighborhood transformation plan, the importance of engaging citizens in planning decisions that will affect them has been emphasized and put to practical use. A number of recent plans for development and revitalization incorporate significant community input, including the Riverfront Island Master Plan and revised Comprehensive Plan.
  - In 2012, Arlington, Virginia, introduced PLACE (Participation, Leadership and Civic Engagement), with the goal of expanding the scope and quality of citizen engagement. The goals are to expand participation in important county decisionmaking processes, and improve the quality of the involvement of citizens in county government, while setting realistic expectations for broader participation in decisionmaking.
2. Formal and informal networks of service providers and stakeholders are needed to advance social equity goals because of their complexity and cross-sectoral nature.
  - In Ann Arbor/Washtenaw County, Michigan, more than 18 partners (including the largest players in economic development—universities, large and small companies, municipalities, the state-level economic development agency, and other organizations) work together to strategically plan around economic and workforce development.



- Through the Smarter, Sustainable Dubuque Partnership in Dubuque, Iowa, equity initiatives are spread out among local government, private organizations and nonprofit organizations, which is exceptionally important as local government financial resources are increasingly constrained.
  - The Hayward Promise Neighborhood in Hayward, California, integrates the efforts of more than 21 community partners toward improving outcomes for a significantly marginalized neighborhood. Led by CSU East Bay, a number of local governments, education nonprofit organizations, and business partners are pursuing a healthier and safer neighborhood with improved literacy rates and access to technology.
3. Clearly articulating the importance of social equity in local government mobilizes support and resources.
    - Through its Coordinated Funding Approach, local government leaders in Ann Arbor/Washtenaw County have identified maintaining and expanding the “social safety net” as a major priority and have assigned responsibility for each priority area to different governmental and nonprofit organizations.
    - Fort Collins, Colorado, conducted a social equity “gap analysis” to identify areas in which important needs were not being met. This analysis has demonstrated a significant affordable housing shortage and yielded an ongoing Housing Affordability Policy Study.
    - Durham/Durham County, North Carolina, faced the shortage of affordable housing openly and adopted a “penny for housing” tax increase in 2012 to address the shortage.
  4. Actions and standards at the state level impact local programs.
    - The requirements established by the state of California are helpful in providing clear, standardized requirements, but it was repeatedly noted that flexibility in how those requirements are met would be more helpful than an imposition of ends and means.
    - In Clark County, Washington, a number of individuals noted that laws established at the state level help in furthering sustainability programs at a consistent pace. Many expressed their hope that more assertive state laws might be passed in the near future.
    - Arlington County has benefited from enabling legislation in state government that authorized an affordable housing mandate, whereas the absence of state authorization in North Carolina limits the options Durham has to include affordable housing in new projects.
  5. A holistic approach to comprehensively serving the needs of the most marginalized groups in a community is critical to achieving social equity.
    - A comprehensive social services system has been established for the immigrant population in Lewiston. This system ensures that members of this group have adequate nutrition, health care services, safe housing, jobs, and access to education, in addition to engaging individuals through opportunities to participate in youth groups and community planning.

- The primary goal of the Office of Economic and Community Development in Ann Arbor is to provide access to high-quality jobs for those who need it. This goal is facilitated through workforce development, affordable housing, and access to transportation for all.
  - In Durham, services to support social equity come from housing improvement and development, neighborhood services, energy conservation, manpower development, community gardening, healthy living, police, social and health services, and transportation.
6. Sustainability activities are dispersed throughout a number of departments in most local governments. Sustainability offices rarely encapsulate all sustainability activities undertaken by the local government as a whole.
- Fort Collins is purposefully organized to holistically address sustainability, with a Chief Sustainability Officer who oversees the Sustainability Services Area. This organization is composed of Social Sustainability, Environmental Services, and Economic Health. The Environmental Services director noted a number of additional sustainability related activities being undertaken by many departments in the city, emphasizing that the Sustainability Services Area is not the only locus of sustainability activity in the city.
  - In Clark County, Washington a single coordinator is responsible for all sustainability reporting and for advocating for sustainability within local government, but sustainability is incorporated into all planning processes and departmental strategies.
  - Dubuque's sustainability plan, *Sustainable Dubuque*, established sustainability as a broad visionary approach: the "lens through which city operations are developed and analyzed. . . likewise there are numerous community initiatives . . . along with businesses that are finding ways to save money and improve their environment and community by implementing the principles that define Sustainable Dubuque" (City of Dubuque, 2014).<sup>7</sup>
7. A number of organizing themes can achieve the objectives of sustainability and social equity. For cases in which it is a tradition to support other goals or in which sustainability, climate change, or equity are politically sensitive topics, other organizing strategies can be successful in achieving desired outcomes.
- In Clark County, public health equity was the organizing strategy by which environmental, economic, and equity objectives were successfully articulated.
  - In Arlington, smart growth is the long-standing commitment that reinforces attention to housing, neighborhood conditions, transportation, energy conservation, and economic development.
  - In Lewiston, integrating a large group of new immigrants and refugees into the community through establishing programs and partnerships was an overriding theme.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.sustainabledubuque.org/en/about\\_us/about\\_sustainable\\_dubuque/](http://www.sustainabledubuque.org/en/about_us/about_sustainable_dubuque/).

8. Local governments can encourage the acceptance of certain initiatives (for example, affordable housing or housing that is universally accessible, green building, or increasing accessibility to healthy food) by well-designed incentives that avoid unintended barriers to desired projects.
  - Through a program called SARD (Sustainable Affordable Residential Development) in 2009, Clark County worked with a group of consultants to process a plan for green development to identify and remove unintended roadblocks to the project. Zoning and planning requirements were reviewed and adjusted to allow for sustainable development projects to be approved in a more streamlined manner.
  - Arlington offers the alternative of requiring 10 percent of units in housing projects be affordable or paying the equivalent of the value of 15 percent of the units into the Affordable Housing Investment Fund.
9. Local governments can advance particular objectives by demonstration and information.
  - Many communities are providing garden space in unused lots, incorporating gardens in parks and governmental facilities, and offering instruction on gardening and cooking with fresh ingredients.
  - Arlington has insulation assistance patterned after master gardeners. The Energy Masters program provides hands-on training in energy efficiency and weatherization techniques to make energy- and water-saving improvements in low-income apartments. The program also includes a special apprenticeship opportunity for high school and college students.
  - Durham has a demonstration project with convenience stores to offer fresh foods including information about how to properly store food.
10. Targeted outreach and assistance are required to involve low-income households in energy conservation projects thereby extending the benefits of reduced utility bills to persons in need.
  - With funding from the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (EECBG) and Climate Showcase Communities program of EPA, the Neighborhood Energy Retrofit Program (NERP) and Home Energy Savings Program (HESP) have focused on installing a few highly effective upgrades in existing residences in Durham, with a target of reducing energy use by 20 percent in participating homes. Improvements have been made in more than 700 homes of low- and moderate-income residents.
11. Support from elected leadership for sustainability and social equity initiatives is crucial for the long-term commitment necessary to achieve positive results. In the absence of such leadership, resources may be reallocated, thereby diminishing the positive impact sustainability programs might otherwise achieve.
  - In Clark County, the most recent election resulted in a change in leadership and subsequent change in priorities. Public health and sustainability were de-emphasized by the new leadership, who are ideologically in favor of a much smaller scope of government primarily emphasizing business interests.

- Arlington County Commission is a champion of the smart growth philosophy and expanding support for affordable housing, energy conservation, active living, and education.
  - In Fort Collins, the importance of a supportive city council with high expectations was repeatedly noted. The council encourages innovation but expects measurable results in support of their objectives.
12. Leadership on social equity-related initiatives can come from staff members at all areas of local government; and social service-oriented staff is required for success in social equity-related initiatives. Initiatives can be pursued laterally and vertically.
- A focus on social inclusion is evident in all levels of local government in Manatee County, Florida. The county administrator has a broad vision for social sustainability as it impacts economic viability, and this vision guides staff to take a holistic approach to future growth that focuses on ensuring equal opportunities for all residents. Leadership in equity and inclusion is also promoted within other departments; for example, the Parks and Natural Resources Department offers many low-cost, accessible programs to ensure that all segments of the community can participate.
  - The Durham Urban Innovation Center within the Neighborhood Improvement Services Department is exploring broad strategies for neighborhood revitalization and sustainability that include the involvement of other departments and residents. The center has produced concept papers on affordable housing and the linkages between housing and transit, agriculture, arts, brownfields, and health with funding from a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Fair Housing Partnership Grant.
13. Restoring the physical assets of the past in the downtown, neighborhood redevelopment, and preserving history and cultural traditions provide the foundation for revitalization and new developments in distressed neighborhoods.
- Community and social vibrancy in Dubuque proceeds in step with economic (re)development that builds from the region's past. Dubuque has a number of plans for redevelopment of the downtown, the Port of Dubuque, the lower income Washington Neighborhood, and the Historic Millwork District, Dubuque's former center of commerce. The district is a model template of complete streets and innovative street scape design to recreate a historic and culturally interesting sense of place.
  - The revival of Durham starting in the 1980s was based on a mix of adaptive reuse of existing structures along with new construction. Economic development activities stressed finding new occupants for renovated structures in the downtown area. Revitalizing and reusing existing structures, especially school building with historic and cultural significance, has also been an element in neighborhood revitalization efforts.

14. Performance metrics in social equity leave a considerable amount to be desired. Community and public health seem to be the areas of social equity in which indicators are most fully developed.
- In Manatee County, the Manatee County Health Department uses data and mapping tools to address the one of its priority issues of food deserts. Availability of these data has enabled public officials to establish and promote farmers' markets and stands where most critically needed. Several other public officials mentioned a desire for better measurements of performance in initiatives related to social equity, such as for the *How We Will Grow* (Manatee County Government, 2013) development plan.
  - Partners in public health in the City of Lewiston (including the county-level public health agency, Healthy Androscoggin, two private hospitals, and other community health agencies) used data from the State of Maine's 2011 OneMaine Health Assessment to conduct a local assessment to design and implement cost-effective ways to improve the health of the population. One of the largest public health issues, lead poisoning, disproportionately affects housing stock in downtown areas where many low-income residents live. Data on lead poisoning is tracked through hospital partners, the Maine Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, and the Maine Office of Geographic Information Systems.
  - In Washtenaw County, data is collected on a multitude of indicators for social equity-related initiatives, including data related to jobs, for grant requirements, including HUD programs and the County Budget, and information collected through resident satisfaction surveys. Key stakeholders are engaged in efforts to identify the most effective indicators to improve impact and resource allocation. In 2013, the Washtenaw Board of Commissioners adopted a resolution to identify appropriate metrics—both for short-term measurable outcomes and long-term impacts—tied to budget priorities in the following areas: (1) ensuring a community safety net through health and human services inclusive of public safety, (2) increasing economic opportunity and workforce development, (3) ensuring mobility and civic infrastructure for county residents, (4) reducing environmental impact, and (5) realizing internal labor force sustainability and effectiveness.

## **Overall Findings**

Based on analysis of all data collected for this investigation, including survey results and case studies, several general findings emerge. The following observations help to shape recommendations designed to increase the capacity of local governments to increase social equity in their communities and increase public awareness of social equity in sustainability.

- Surprisingly few governments are organizing and resourcing their sustainability initiatives in a centralized manner or through a comprehensive plan. Fewer still are addressing social equity issues as an integrated part of their sustainability strategies. The distribution of actions adopted related to sustainability overall, and to equity in particular, are more heavily concentrated at the low end than is typical for the diffusion of many innovations. Moving the distribution of all local governments toward the “middle” is needed in sustainability overall and in social

equity in particular. Many good examples from early adopters and leaders in sustainability fortunately provide guidance to those governments that are waiting to get more involved. Thus, governments that are leaders in sustainability need to be more involved in social equity.

- Communities should develop either a comprehensive plan (with measures) or a comprehensive assessment tool to provide a scorecard of what is being accomplished toward addressing sustainability that integrates the social equity component. This approach helps to ensure that interrelated activities support each other and that the coverage has no gaps.
- Better measures and comprehensive monitoring of accomplishments in all aspects of sustainability are needed. The STAR Community Index is an example of a comprehensive tool for addressing this, but it can be overwhelming in its detail. Each community can develop its own principles related to sustainability goals with indicators of performance. Dubuque offers a strong example of a comprehensive framework for evaluation with measures to show how it is doing.<sup>8</sup> Other communities have extensive measures but have not drawn them together in one place with clear reference to the aspect of sustainability that they are measuring.

## Conclusion

A central question in the case studies was to determine how the local government defines and explains social equity as part of their sustainability program. When interviewing local government officials, it was very common to be asked the question—what do you mean by “sustainability” and what do you mean by “equity”? If local officials do not know what social equity means or how it is related to sustainability, they are less likely to adopt programs that promote social equity. The case studies indicate a need for a sustainability framework that supports the incorporation of social equity and coordination of the three dimensions of sustainability. This concluding section reexamines alternative ways that social equity is related to the other critical aspects of sustainability to develop a clearer rationale.

## The Triple-Bottom-Line Approach

The long-standing approach has emphasized giving attention to three dimensions of sustainability—this is the “three-legged stool” model.<sup>9</sup> This concept implies that if the social equity leg is missing, the stool will fall over. Stated positively, “the concept is that everyone in a community—not only those on the ‘A List’—needs the opportunity to participate and thrive for that community to sustain itself indefinitely” (Chapman, 2014). A graphic to illustrate the interconnections is showing sustainability as a Venn diagram with three overlapping circles—one for each dimension (exhibit 13). This is certainly the prevailing conceptual model and is used by Dubuque to illustrate the components of its program.

Fort Collins has created an integrated administrative framework for its efforts in the areas of economic, environmental, and social sustainability. Ann Arbor approved a sustainability framework

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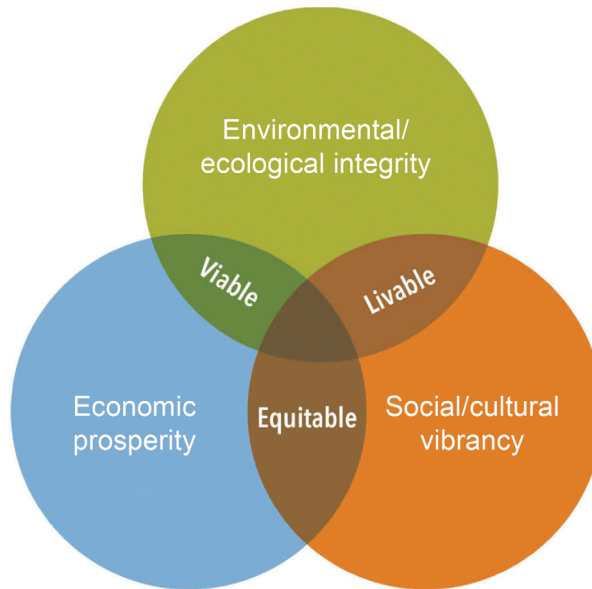
<sup>8</sup> [http://www.sustainableubuque.org/documents/filelibrary/documents/Final\\_Report\\_with\\_Appendices\\_29E33A454A218.pdf](http://www.sustainableubuque.org/documents/filelibrary/documents/Final_Report_with_Appendices_29E33A454A218.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> A similar approach is to measure results in the three dimensions—the “triple-bottom-line” method—although the lack of attention to metrics means that bottom lines are not being measured in most communities.

### Exhibit 13

#### Dubuque's Venn Diagram of the Elements of Sustainability

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in 2013 with elements that go beyond the three dimensional approach. The elements in its framework are climate and energy, community (which includes economic vitality), land use and access, and resource management. For some communities, this approach with explicit emphasis on the three “Es” will be the preferred rationale for its sustainability program.

The other case-study communities do not present their wide-ranging activities related to sustainability in an integrated framework. It appears that a different approach is needed to explain what sustainability means and what it will include. To be clear, this is a different way of articulating a commitment to sustainability—not a change in the content of what sustainability means.

### Nested Model

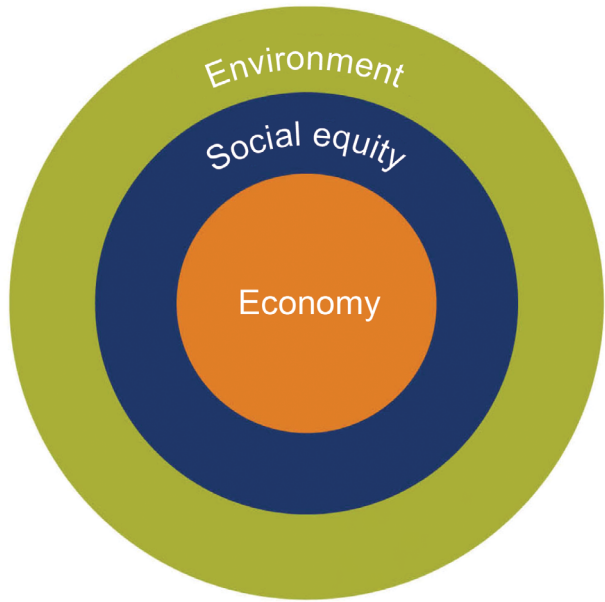
Another approach is to think of the dimensions as concentric circles. In exhibit 14, the economy is viewed as “nested” in the social dimension, and all human activities are affected by and in turn impact the condition of the environment. Melissa McCullough, Senior Sustainability Advisor in the Sustainable and Healthy Communities Research Program for EPA in Research Triangle Park, expressed the relationships this way in an assessment she did while on detail working with the Durham Sustainability Office—

Another consideration is that the three “legs” of sustainability are not so much equal, as nested. The economy of any given place cannot exist without a stable society around it. Durham has seen that in the past as crime, or the perception of a crime problem, adversely affected our economy. A society is defined by more than its economy; things like relationships, culture, norms, place, language, and much more. This set of societal inputs

**Exhibit 14**

**Nested Diagram of Sustainability Elements**

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is recognized in Durham's plans, in the desire to maintain a sense of place and history. In a similar way, a society exists within, and depends on, its environment. A sense of place arises first from its natural context. (McCullough, 2011)

In this view, the social dimension is not optional or only partially linked to the other dimensions. It is the essential setting for economic activity, exactly like the economic and social dimensions that are nested in the environment. For economies to thrive, all must participate. Environmental enhancement supports social and economic activity and depends on the contributions of all segments of the population.

**Defining Livability and Viability in the Sustainability Context**

The challenge in expanding actions to promote sustainability is to create a broad rationale that can be easily understood and related to other community goals. All of the case-study jurisdictions have active agendas that include a wide range of the activities associated with the three dimensions of sustainability, but they differ in the extent to which they explain and organize these activities under the banner of sustainability. Three of the case-study communities had a clear, integrated approach to sustainability, but the common underlying purpose across all of these communities is that they are promoting livability and viability. When identifying the components of sustainability at the community level, it may be helpful to identify these qualities as the underlying objectives of



a comprehensive approach to sustainability.<sup>10</sup> Livability by itself has a present orientation that must be balanced with the long-term perspective of viability. For example, Portland identifies qualities it wants to foster now and during the next 25 years. Both qualities—livability and viability—necessarily have economic, social, and environmental aspects. It is possible that this definition of sustainability may resonate in a wider array of communities: sustainability is a commitment to improving the livability of our community for all its residents and to strengthening the viability of our community for all who will live here in the future.

Livability is central to the definition of sustainability developed by HUD, DOT, and EPA working together under the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. It should be available for everyone in a locality. Thus livability presumes equity as well as economic opportunity and a supportive environment. Viability means being capable of normal growth and development. A city or county, like an organism, does not achieve normal growth and development when some of its parts are not healthy, not functioning fully, or deprived of essentials so that another part of the organism can succeed. Since World War II, various forms of disconnected social and economic processes have emerged in American urban areas. They are examples of incomplete development. Racial segregation based on laws and social restrictions was replaced by residential segregation and the increasing physical separation of races between suburbs and central cities. Economic development benefited most of the population, but left others behind and shifted some of the costs of production, such as pollution, to low-income areas. These practices are not sustainable because they deny livable conditions to many and they undermine viability. Urban areas with empty centers did not thrive although residents of outlying areas could try to ignore the areas that were falling behind. Now many young professionals as well as retirees have returned to the community centers, and social interdependence is unmistakable. Exactly like recognizing how economic strategies can destroy the environment by pollution or exhausting scarce resources and can weaken long-term economic viability, it is clear that practices that exploit or ignore disadvantaged members of our communities and harm their quality of life are not viable.

### **Applying Livability and Viability Rationale to Communities With Limited Current Activities**

The discussion of how sustainability is conceptualized and the rationale for including social equity has been based on the actions of the case-study governments and other leaders in sustainability. Examine the reasons for including social equity in communities with lower levels of social distress like those in the low-equity comparison group. The first reason is that these governments have significant disadvantaged populations compared with the high-equity governments. For example, the average percent of persons in poverty in the two groups of governments was 17 percent in communities with a strong commitment to social equity and 12 percent in the comparison group. Groups in these localities clearly would benefit from equity measures and would contribute to the

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<sup>10</sup> Dubuque uses these terms in its graphic (exhibit 13) to summarize the approach to sustainability. The program affirms that “Dubuque is a viable, livable, and equitable community.” This approach is worthwhile. It is also possible to argue that equity along with other dimensions of sustainability is essential to both livability and viability. That approach is the one taken in this report.

overall sustainability plans of these governments. Furthermore, analysis of census data over time indicates the ever greater dispersion of minority groups and the poor. Without attention to equity, current residents may be forced out of the community.

Ignoring equity represents a failure to meet needs of nonresidents that are already working in these communities but cannot afford to live where they work. Failure to expand housing options for moderate-income job holders contributes to other sustainability problems, most obviously long-distance commuting with increased energy consumption and cost to the commuters but also the loss of time for family or personal wellness activities. Although a community may be prosperous in the present, its economic viability is threatened when it is not an attractive place to live for the teachers, police officers, service workers, and consumers that the community wants to attract. Equity spillover effects in other communities that result from ignoring or excluding the disadvantaged, such as excessive concentrations of low-income or homeless people in some localities because of the refusal of other jurisdictions to accommodate these people within their boundaries. Sustainability must be a shared effort pursued beyond narrow boundaries. Livability and viability need to be examined on a regional basis, as well as within each separate jurisdiction.

### **Livability and Viability Rationale in Federal Sustainability Priorities**

The federal government has made significant progress in defining and advancing sustainability through the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. The activities it has promoted explore linkages between components of sustainability. Its livability principles encourage communities to approach sustainability as a multifaceted strategy. Clearly recognition of environmental justice and equitable development is evident in the work of the Partnership.<sup>11</sup> The opportunity exists to establish a comprehensive and integrated definition of sustainability, however, by further developing its social dimension. Equity is mentioned explicitly in regard to affordable housing and commitment to equity is implied in supporting all existing neighborhoods; however their definition of “sustainable communities” provides no explicit mention of other features related to equity, environment, or economy, potentially limiting the scope of activities associated with achieving greater social sustainability. In addition, the elements identified in the 2013 EPA report entitled *Creating Equitable, Healthy, and Sustainable Communities* (EPA, 2013), add certain features missing from the livability principles: meaningful community engagement, public health and a clean and safe environment, access to opportunities and daily necessities, and preservation of the features that make a community distinctive.<sup>12</sup> The overall approach in this report, however, does not discuss sustainability as an overarching concept. Are “equitable, healthy, and sustainable communities” unified or separate goals?

Sustainability is a complex concept with multiple dimensions. Each community must examine its own circumstances and future prospects to determine which aspects of sustainability will be targeted for action. It is clear that some aspects of sustainability may not be relevant in a particular community, but the assessment of need and the review of possible initiatives should take consider the full scope of sustainability. As local governments look to the Partnership for Sustainable Communities for guidance, it is important that they find a comprehensive definition that encourages

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Partnership for Sustainable Communities (2010).

<sup>12</sup> The report does not refer explicitly to the principles of livability.

a broad examination of how they can create a prosperous, healthy, and inclusive community now and in the future. In the Partnership, attention should be given to expanding the livability principles and to more clearly articulating a definition of sustainability that includes these elements: sustainability is a commitment to improving the livability of the community for all its residents and to strengthening the social, economic, and environmental viability of the community for all who will live there in the future.

In conclusion, several different ways to explain and justify a commitment to sustainability exist that include a social equity component. The livability and viability of communities depends on a strong economy, inclusive society, and sound environment. Equity is essential for a livable present and a viable future. Each community needs to find the rationale and goals that best match its values and engage the community in pursuing steps to advance livability and viability for all.

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