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Telling Our Story—A Community-Based Meso-Level Approach to Sustainable Community Development

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Abstract: Engaging diverse stakeholders in dialogue around sustainable development has proven to be a successful strategy to advance sustainable development goals. Without local engagement, sustainable development efforts can fail to accomplish their objectives. Yet, determining the best strategy for engaging diverse stakeholders can be challenging. Similarly challenging can be the transfer of information regarding successful development strategies from one community to another. Local specificity is key to finding sustainable development solutions. Yet, knowledge creation one-community-at-a-time is time consuming and limits the transferability of knowledge. Meso-level approaches are therefore essential to finding transferable solutions. The Five-Pillars approach to development is such a meso-level mixed methods approach. It identifies a manageable set of indicators in five common categories: education, health, environmental quality, social and cultural amenities, and information and transportation access. These indicator categories form the basis for selecting specific locations within a community where local stakeholders engage in writing a collective story about their sustainable development future. This article describes the implementation of the Five Pillars approach in two neighborhoods in Washington D.C. It concludes that the approach offers an effective engagement strategy that gives voice to the sustainable development vision of local stakeholders while providing a framework that can benefit diverse communities.

Keywords: sustainable community development; stakeholder engagement; participatory urban planning; mixed-methods research; meso-level methodology



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1. Introduction

Engaging a diverse community of stakeholders in dialogue around sustainable development goals has proved to be a successful strategy to advance sustainable development outcomes [1–4]. Without the engagement of local stakeholders, and especially those most impacted by planned development initiatives, development efforts can fail to accomplish their objectives and may even exacerbate existing disparities and socially and environmentally unsustainable outcomes [5–7]. At the same time, the transfer of information from one community to another can be key to advancing broader sustainable development objectives in a cost-effective and timely manner. This creates a methodological tension. Engaging local stakeholders takes time and attention to the specific characteristics of a local community and its unique economic, social, cultural, and environmental context conditions. Yet, unique approaches to community engagement limit the transferability of knowledge and the ability of communities to learn from each other. Meso-level approaches are therefore essential to finding transferable sustainable development solutions that avoid a one-size-fits-all trap.

A meso-level approach is situated between the case study level and the generalized level of analysis [8,9]. It strikes a balance between creating success strategies for a specific community, and replicating these strategies across the economic, social and environmental characteristics of local communities and regions. A practical meso-level approach are the

so-called Five Pillars of Development pioneered by the lead author of this article [10,11]. The Five Pillars approach combines a quantitative methodology of collecting and analyzing proactive indicators in five key indicator categories with a qualitative, story-telling methodology structured around the same five categories. The approach seeks to respect local specificity (the story) while aiming to create transferrable solutions across varied communities (the five pillars). The quantitative component creates transferability by collecting data in five consistent areas—(1) education, (2) health, (3) environmental quality and recreation, (4) social and cultural amenities, and (5) information technology and transportation access. All five of these areas are inextricably linked to the domains of politics, economics, justice, and inclusion both at the micro (community) and the macro (society) level [12]. Research substantiates these inherent connections by showing that participatory planning all too often addresses the needs of whiter, older, and wealthier residents while excluding the needs of black and brown, younger, and poorer residents [13]. The Five Pillars approach recognizes the political, economic, and justice implications of the five indicator areas and engages all stakeholders in defining their future expression. The quantitative component of the approach also forms the basis for identifying existing disparities and therefore specific locations within a community that must be engaged. By amplifying the voices of stakeholders in these neglected locations, the approach shifts agency within the development process itself.

The Five Pillars approach thus makes a meaningful contribution to the theory and practice of community development in three ways: one, by enhancing learning across varied communities; two, by upholding the need to account for specific local characteristics; and three, by outlining a strategy that shifts agency to previously marginalized stakeholders. All three aspects address a significant gap in community development planning, both in the literature and in practice. While most participative planning methods focus on macro or micro approaches [14], the Five Pillars approach leverages qualities from both at the meso-level. The proper degree of abstraction is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of a meso-level approach, yet abstraction cannot become exclusionary and must remain rooted in experience. In practice, the Five Pillars approach accomplishes this by asking all participants to root themselves in the quantitative data categories while making space for the lived experience of all participants. This marriage of data and lived experience moves the participative planning field from ephemeral concepts of design and learning to outputs based in measurable indicators of well-being and community vision [15].

The Five Pillars categories are rooted in the Quality-of-Life (QoL) philosophy of development which recognizes that the development efforts of a local community do not take place in a vacuum. They are instead embedded in a specific economic, social, cultural, and environmental context. Any development decision impacts the quality and health of the economic, social, cultural, and environmental characteristics of a community and region. The health and well-being of a community's economic, social, cultural, and environmental context, in turn, impacts the quality of life and health of a community and its stakeholders [14,16]. Sustainable development must therefore consider its impact on the quality of life of a community and its economic, social, cultural, and environmental conditions. Much has been written about how to measure the QoL of a community and how to capture the complex economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of a high versus low QoL [17–19]. Recurring features of a high QoL include good schools, quality medical care, a safe environment, recreational opportunities, and amenities like restaurants, music venues and theaters. The Five Pillars reflect these recurring QoL features.

The Five Pillars approach also aligns with the so-called 'leak plugging' and 're-localizing' strategy of development [20–23]. This strategy argues that key to the long-term development success of a community is its ability to leverage local assets and needs. There are, in principle, two ways to implement this strategy: one, by attracting businesses to a community and region with the goal of addressing local needs and creating local jobs; and two, by growing businesses from within the community to meet local demand and utilize or train a local workforce in the process. Both are not unrelated to the QoL framework. In

today's economy, jobs no longer have to be located in close proximity to where a workforce with expendable income lives [24,25]. Lessons learned during the recent COVID pandemic have further confirmed the expectations of a skilled, and sought-after workforce, to choose where to live. Businesses that rely on such a workforce must therefore be able to attract and retain it. This may require more than offering competitive wages, and may also include attractive amenities such as gyms, a stimulating work environment, flexible work hours, and remote work options. Other attractive features, such as recreational opportunities, good schools, and a strong health and wellness sector, may depend less on decisions taken by an employer, and more on other local and regional decision makers. Local communities may in turn find it necessary to collaborate with businesses to build strong amenities and a high QoL in order to maintain their tax base. QoL factors can therefore be considered a meta-structure for community-based planning whereby a shared future vision can be developed around broadly accepted QoL factors.

Successful private–public collaborations will, however, require that all key stakeholders empirically understand the QoL of a community [26]. The process of exploring the intersectional relationship of QoL measures and communities was codified in the early 20th century when the Russell Sage Foundation provided funding for the collection and tracking of community-level data for QoL improvements [27]. This gave rise to community indicator projects such as the Citizen Engagement PACT of Jacksonville and Strategic Spartanburg, two of the longest running indicator projects in the United States [28,29]. Institutions such as these spend significant time and resources working with local experts to get their QoL measures right. Selecting indicators that measure, manage, and quantify success is a vital part of sustainable development. Successful indicators should speak to two domains: practical aspects and technical aspects. From a practical perspective, indicators must be measurable, feasible for the project at hand, meaningful, outcomes-oriented, actionable, and timely; from a technical perspective, they must be reliable and valid, scientifically and logically credible, and sensitive to changes in economic, social, cultural and environmental conditions [11,15,30].

The Five Pillars approach and its five areas meet these objectives. The approach focuses on five indicator categories that can be considered lead indicators. This implies that they provide a trajectory to the future (see Figure 1). For example, if schools underperform, recreational opportunities are limited, and amenities are lacking, it will be difficult to attract and retain a qualified workforce. By tracking specific lead indicators in each of the five indicator categories, communities can be more proactive in their development decisions. In contrast, reactive measures such as GDP per capita and unemployment rates, communicate the outcomes of development decisions made years prior [11]. Most importantly, sustainable development measures must reflect the development vision of local stakeholders, and especially of those most impacted by the decisions. When marginalized local perspectives are excluded from defining the sustainable development vision of a community, the result will be doing what has always been done, resorting to generalities about desired outcomes, and lacking accountability. Indicators can therefore provide structure to a community's sustainable development vision, but they are no substitute for broad participation in creating it [31].

This paper illustrates the Five Pillars approach by reviewing its application in two neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. located in the city's most underserved Wards. It first provides a brief review of some of the indicators collected for the quantitative component of the Five Pillars approach, and illustrates how the indicators can be used to provide a focus for the qualitative story-telling component of the approach. It then describes the qualitative component which centered around two story-telling events conducted in two of the most underserved neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative components of the Five Pillars approach illustrate its meso-level character consisting of the more generally applicable, transferrable indicator component (quantitative), and the specific community-based story-telling component (qualitative). Finally, this paper reviews

the findings of the approach and implications for a local sustainable development vision and its implementation.

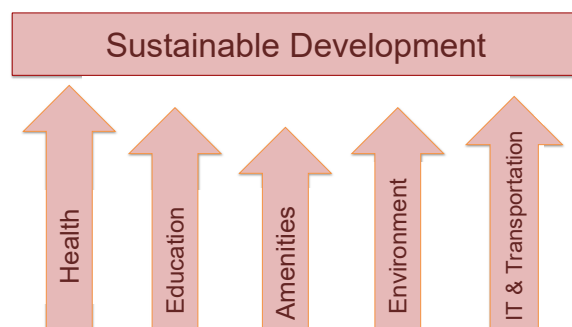


Figure 1. The Five Pillars Approach to Development.

2. Materials and Methods

Using the example of Washington, D.C., the following discussion of the Five Pillars approach illustrates its mixed method, meso-level characteristics. The discussion starts with a description of the structured data analysis around the Five Pillar categories of health, education, social and cultural amenities, environmental quality and recreation, and information technology and transportation access. It then turns to the qualitative component that engaged local stakeholders in describing their sustainable development vision through a story structured around these same Five Pillar categories.

2.1. The Quantitative Component: Indicators of Development

The quantitative indicator portion of the Five Pillars model provides an overview of the current state of development using publicly available data and analyzing them in five actionable categories. In the case of Washington, D.C., forty-four indicators were collected for each of the city's eight Wards, which form the administrative structure of the city (Figure 2). Six indicators describe the education pillar, six the health pillar, five the social- and cultural amenities, seven the environmental quality and recreation, and six the information technology and transportation pillar. In addition, fourteen socio-economic, and demographic indicators were collected to provide both background and critical reference points for the Five Pillars data. A selection of the background indicators is summarized in Table 1. The selected indicators attempt to balance practical issues like availability and ease of communication with purposeful ones like relevance, action orientation, and validity. A complete list of indicators can be found online [11].

Figures 3 and 4 provide a sample of the education and health related data across the eight Wards of Washington D.C. Figure 5 illustrates one of the amenities indicators using the example of full-service grocery stores. Table 2 provides a snapshot of the environment indicators, and Table 3 presents some of the selected information technology and transportation access indicators. Data in all Five Pillar categories plus the background indicators illustrate significant disparities across the eight Wards of Washington, D.C. Some indicators improved over time, for example, the percentage of the population with a college degree or higher increased between 2000 and 2018 across all eight Wards. Yet, disparities between the best educated Wards (Ward 2 and 3) and the least educated ones (Ward 7 and 8) remained. The data identify two of the eight D.C. Wards as having been largely excluded from past development success—Wards 7 and 8. These findings indicate that the quantitative component of the Five Pillars model cannot be underestimated. As Swain and Hollar argue, indicators can "... raise consciousness among citizens and decision makers, to reconfigure priorities among issues most deserving of community attention, and to shape the agenda for public consideration of action and allocation of resources" [15] (p. 797).

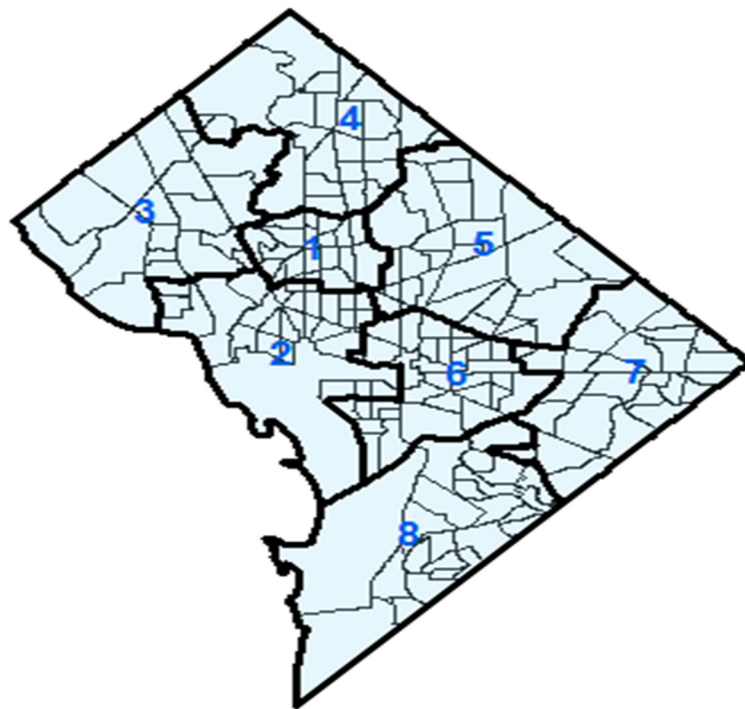


Figure 2. The 8 Wards of Washington D.C. and Census Tracts within the Wards.

Table 1. Socio-economic and demographic background data for Washington, D.C. by Ward.

Demographics	Ward 1	Ward 2	Ward 3	Ward 4	Ward 5	Ward 6	Ward 7	Ward 8
Total population	82,859	77,645	83,152	83,066	82,049	84,290	73,290	81,133
Children under 18	12%	5%	13%	20%	17%	14%	24%	30%
People over 65	2%	6%	13%	3%	2%	3.3%	0.3%	0.2%
Black (non-Hispanic)	33%	10%	5.6%	59%	77%	43%	95%	94%
White (non-Hispanic)	40%	70%	78%	20%	15%	47%	2%	3%
Hispanic	21%	9%	8%	19%	6%	5%	2%	2%
Asian	5%	10%	8%	2%	2%	5%	0.3%	0.5%
Household Income	USD 113,972	USD 209,147	USD 257,224	USD 123,353	USD 82,425	USD 140,853	USD 56,759	USD 45,239
Unemployment	5.1%	3.8%	3.7%	9.8%	14%	6.2%	19%	22%

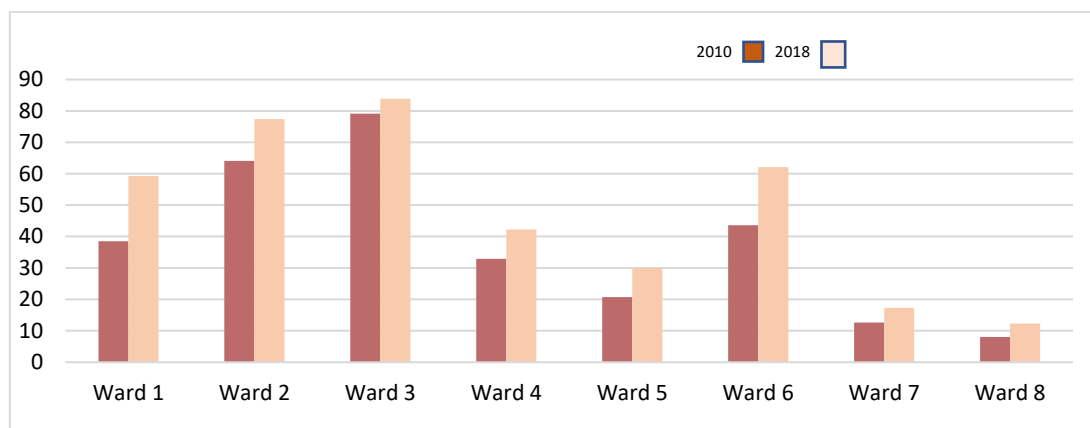


Figure 3. Percentage of the Washington D.C. population with a college degree or higher by Ward.

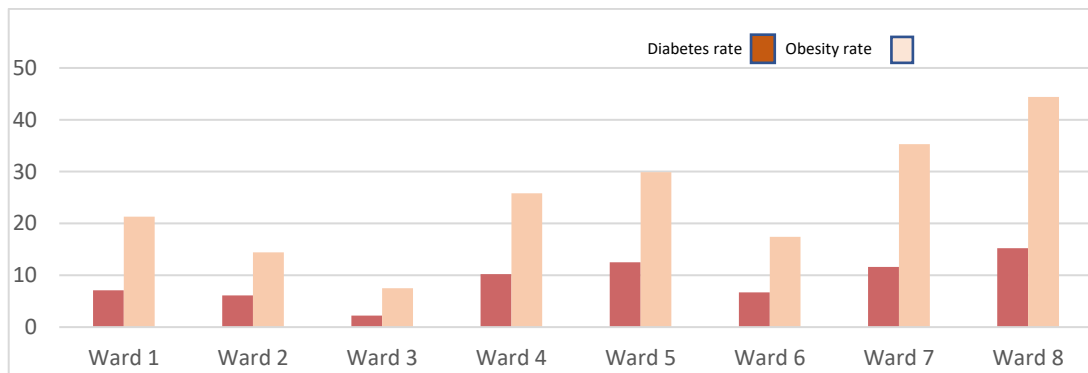


Figure 4. Percentage of Washington D.C.'s adult population with obesity and diabetes by Ward.

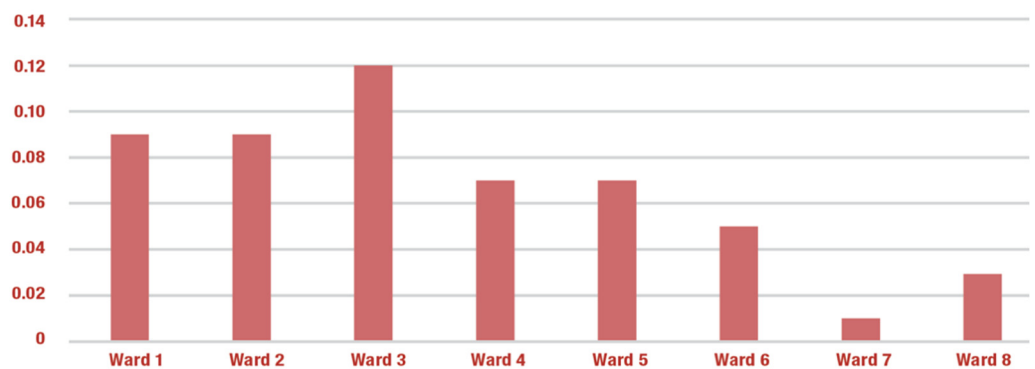


Figure 5. Washington D.C. Full-service grocery stores per 1000 of the population by Ward.

Table 2. Selected indicators of environmental quality and recreation.

Transportation Indicators	Ward 1	Ward 2	Ward 3	Ward 4	Ward 5	Ward 6	Ward 7	Ward 8
Metro Stations	4	11	5	3	4	8	3	2
Bus lines	17	43	18	25	29	20	14	28
% biking to work	5%	3%	2%	1%	2%	4%	0.2%	0.1%

Table 3. Selected transportation Indicators.

Environment and Recreation	Ward 1	Ward 2	Ward 3	Ward 4	Ward 5	Ward 6	Ward 7	Ward 8
Parks	32	33	57	82	67	33	31	31
Bike Paths in miles	11	19	6	8	7	17	4	0.3
Blighted Buildings	24	39	4	38	86	5	119	123

Given their past exclusion from successful development, participation from neighborhoods in Wards 7 and 8 became a priority for defining a sustainable development future for Washington, D.C. overall. The quantitative findings therefore provided a focus for the subsequent qualitative component of the Five Pillars approach. Focusing the qualitative component on neighborhoods excluded from past development success, shifts agency of the development process to new, previously excluded voices.

2.2. The Qualitative Component: Telling the Story of a Sustainable Development Future

The qualitative component of the Five Pillars approach utilizes a story writing process to give expression to the development future defined by stakeholders in those locations that the quantitative component identified as marginalized. In the case of Washington, D.C., two neighborhoods in Wards 7 and 8 were selected as the locations for the story writing component: the Deanwood neighborhood in Ward 7 and the Congress Heights neighborhood in Ward 8. The expressed purpose of the qualitative story writing component

of the Five Pillars approach is to provide an accessible platform where underrepresented local voices can be heard. These voices form the basis for a participatory approach to sustainable development informed by data (i.e., context, history, current outcomes) and vision (i.e., stories about the future) that can be operationalized [32,33].

The integration of storytelling in the approach provides a vital link that bridges the gap between planning and community engagement. This forms the very basis for inclusive, sustainable development. Writing a collective story about the future of a community puts community stakeholders in the driver's seat in determining their vision for their community. This goes beyond a passive engagement of rubber stamping, or even of weighing in on a development vision advanced by others who typically reside outside of the community [34]. A story can be widely shared and invites the participatory discourse of a range of stakeholders including those who do not commonly participate in development and planning decisions, and who may be less familiar with the language of credentialed development experts. As the local experts, long-time residents are familiar with the history, culture, economic, social, and environmental conditions of their community. Beyond providing a process to engage community members in visioning and sharing their experiences, storytelling also creates narratives essential for meaning-making and understanding [31,35]. In a facilitated story writing process, community members share narratives, personal experiences, their connection to place, and their desire for the current and future state of their community, which serves multiple purposes. Story writing can therefore provide a way to bring community experiences, local expertise, and insights to the fore that could be overlooked in a standard planning process [35].

The story writing component of the Five Pillars approach can also be considered an expression of engaged discourse as defined by the German sociologist Juergen Habermas [36–40]. It can give rise to two levels of understanding. First, story writing can give expression to a specific goal or purpose, in our case identifying the shared vision for the sustainable development future of two local neighborhoods (Zielorientierter Diskurs = goal-oriented discourse). Secondly, the process can improve mutual understanding among diverse participants in the vision process and their various perspectives (Verständnisorientierter Diskurs = understanding-oriented discourse). According to Habermas, the communicative exchange of individuals in a mutually respectful discourse process will give rise to communicative reason, as compared to instrumental reason that is socio-technologically and individualistically determined [41]. Communicative reason refers to the reason expressed in a discourse among a diverse group of participants. It views reason as inseparably linked to and informed by the human experience of diverse social, cultural, and environmental life worlds that constitute the context of human experience. Therefore, a group discourse creates a sum of life world contexts, which are greater than their parts, by including multiple perceptions and expressions of economic, social, cultural, and environmental context conditions, conveyed in the voices of discourse participants.

A key characteristic of such a mutually respectful discourse process is that all discourse participants have the same rights and responsibilities and recognize agreed-upon procedural rules [37,38,40,42]. For example, participants must be committed to principles of fairness, respect for the contributions of others, and openness to new information and learning throughout the discourse process. The discourse contributions of participants can generally be identified with one or more of the following categories: (1) communicative contributions intent on improving understanding; (2) cognitive contributions intent on providing evidence; (3) normative contributions intent on identifying priorities and preferences; and (4) expressive or affective contributions intent on convincing. All four categories can find expression in the process of writing a collective story. Some practitioners, however, caution that affective statements should be translated into cognitive or normative ones, typically by a trained facilitator who enforces a set of procedural rules. Various procedural rules can be found in the literature [41–43]; they typically include the following [44]:

- Inclusion—all potentially affected parties must be given access to the discourse process.

- Mutual acceptance—participants must be willing and held accountable to accept all discourse participants and their contributions.
- Equal rights—the contributions of all participants must receive equal weight and every participant must have the opportunity to influence the whole.
- Equal access to information—participants must have equal access to information and be willing to share information.
- Procedural flexibility—participants must have the opportunity to revise their positions and alter preliminary results, for example.
- Openness—process results must be open to all parties.
- Absence of power—participants must establish formal equality so that no one can assert power over others.

Since the story writing component of the Five Pillars process seeks to meet the standards of an ethical discourse that can capture both purpose- and understanding-oriented contributions, all participants in the Ward 7 and 8 story writing process were briefed on the procedural rules outlined above. To level the playing field with respect to pre-existing information, all participants received an overview of the quantitative findings of the Five Pillars approach. Fourteen students and staff members from the University of the District of Columbia's College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability and Environmental Sciences (UDC CAUSES) were trained as story writing facilitators and recorders. Recorders concentrated on capturing the content contributions of the story writing participants, while the facilitators focused on the process and on maintaining the agreed-upon procedural rules. Prior to the story writing events, the facilitators also practiced how to translate affective statements into cognitive or normative ones in two role playing sessions.

The process of writing the story of the sustainable development future of the Deanwood and Congress Heights neighborhoods in Wards 7 and 8 took place in two all-day story-writing events. The venues selected for the events were familiar and readily accessible to local stakeholders. One was an elementary school in Ward 7 the other a community center in Ward 8. A resident from the Deanwood neighborhood was identified as outreach coordinator to recruit story writing participants. Students and staff members from UDC CAUSES assisted with the recruitment efforts at churches, businesses, community centers, neighborhood association meetings, libraries, and through door-to-door invitations. In each case, the outreach team distributed flyers, offered a verbal invitation, and explained the goals of the story writing events, including the time commitment, event location, the fact that breakfast and lunch would be provided, and that every participant would receive a USD 20 gift card for the D.C. subway and bus system in recognition of their efforts. The goal of these outreach efforts was to ensure that a wide range of participants representing different ages, socio-economic groups, races, ethnicities, and education levels would be represented at the story writing events.

A total of 78 participants from Deanwood and Congress Heights engaged in the story writing process. Participation from Deanwood (Ward 7) was somewhat stronger than from Congress Heights (Ward 8). Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information by filling out a short intake form. They also received written assurance that no identifying characteristics would be used in any subsequent information about the story writing events to protect their privacy. Male and female participants were almost equally represented with a slightly higher representation of female participants. Participants' ages ranged from a small representation of 18-year-olds to senior citizens over 65. The majority of participants were in the 35–44 and 45–54 age brackets. Participants also spanned a wide range of formal education from no high school diploma to post graduate education. Several participants reported being unemployed, some were retired, and some attended school. The majority reported having a full-time job. Some also identified themselves as being associated with a local business, non-profit organization, or a local government agency.

Both story-writing events started with a briefing for all participants over breakfast. Story-writing participants were then assigned to smaller groups to share their ideas for the future of their neighborhood and larger community, with respect to each of the Five

Pillar categories. The question posed to each group was as follows: what do you want your neighborhood to look like 15 years from today with respect to (1) education, (2) health, (3) social and cultural amenities, (4) environmental quality and recreation, and (5) information technology and transportation access. Each small group discussion was timed to ensure that equal time was devoted to discussing all Five Pillar topics. Participants rotated to a different room for each of the five topics to signal the change in focus for their future development vision. A facilitator and recorder were assigned to manage a single room for the same Pillar throughout the entire process, to ensure that they heard all participant contributions on a specific topic, such as all contributions to education, for example. The trained facilitators ensured that the small discussion groups respected the agreed-upon ground rules, stayed on topic, and allowed all participants to speak to prevent any one participant from dominating the conversation. The trained recorders did not participate in the discussion.

The resulting story was based on a thorough analysis of the contributions of all participants captured in the meeting notes and records assembled by the recorders and facilitators. After an initial reading of all records, the material was scanned and analyzed for key words and phrases to identify the most frequently stated suggestions. Contributions that were mentioned repeatedly and found strong resonance with participants, were included in the story. While the story preserved some of the specific characteristics of the two neighborhoods in Wards 7 and 8, many of the ideas were mentioned in both event locations and captured larger, less location specific themes. This is reminiscent of the collective stories captured in other narrative approaches such as a Q search. In a Q-search conducted in upstate New York, for example, focus group participants were asked to rank statements about the environment according to the degree of agreement with each statement. While the rankings reflected individual priorities, they also reflected identifiable larger social narratives [45,46].

Once all records were analyzed, several facilitators and recorders reviewed a first draft of the story prepared by the lead author. Participants from both story writing events were then contacted and invited to a joint meeting at a local elementary school to provide feedback on the draft of the collective Five Pillars story. Focus group participants from both neighborhoods attended the feedback meeting, although attendance was small overall. Meeting participants confirmed that the draft captured the discussions of the story writing events and that each chapter reflected the five discussions associated with the Five Pillar categories. Participants also provided useful comments on the story draft and its five (Pillars) chapters. One of the most consistent comments was not related to the content of the five story chapters, but to the narrative itself. Participants in the feedback meeting were almost unanimous in their request to provide further detail about the people in the story chapters. Rather than telling the story in the third-person format, participants wanted real people reflecting the demographics of their neighborhoods to appear in the story chapters. Meeting participants also discussed a few examples of how the data from the quantitative component of the Five Pillars study might be used to track progress toward the implementation of their sustainable development vision captured in the Five Pillars story.

Due to the small number of participants who attended the feedback meeting, additional participants from the two initial story writing events were contacted randomly to provide further feedback and to ensure that the story reflected the shared vision of the story writing participants. What follows is a summary of key findings of the story writing process. The full text is available online [11].

3. Discussion: Lessons for a Meso-Level Sustainable Development Approach

While the indicators describing the Five Pillars approach represent the current state of the eight Wards of Washington, D.C., the story provides a community-based vision of the future state. This future state is deliberately rooted in two neighborhoods that have been excluded from past development success and whose vision has received little notice. Given this past exclusion, the indicators that describe the current state and form the starting point

for the analysis (the quantitative component of the Five Pillars approach) may have to be amended to measure progress toward the community-based, future vision (the qualitative component of the Five Pillars approach). Indicators that capture the future vision outlined in the story can be readily added to the Five Pillar categories. This maintains a degree of consistency and transferability while accounting for the specifics of the local vision.

3.1. Story Narratives

The five chapters of the collective story describing a sustainable future for the two D.C. neighborhoods in Wards 7 and 8 reflect more than the vision of neighborhood stakeholders. Their collective story also captures a larger narrative that may offer insights beyond the two neighborhoods. For example, food features prominently in the ‘amenities’ chapter of the story, as well as in the ‘health’, ‘education’ and ‘environment’ chapters. This is consistent with findings in other urban neighborhoods where a more localized food system has emerged as a focus to improve health outcomes and economic conditions [47,48]. In the wake of the COVID pandemic, local food systems have also been identified as a buffer against shock events that render global supply chains as vulnerable [49]. Similarly, the robust green-infrastructure discussion captured in the ‘environment and recreation’ chapter of the story may offer transferrable lessons for other communities wrestling with needed infrastructure adaptations that can improve resiliency and buffer against external shocks stemming from climate change and its increasingly erratic precipitation patterns. While some story lines were expected, others were surprising and illustrate the need to refocus accepted development narratives. Key narratives of the Five Pillars story are summarized here. The full text is available online [11].

3.1.1. Education

A frequently mentioned theme in the education chapter of the story is the need for better education outcomes across the entire spectrum of secondary, post-secondary, and vocational education. Given the relatively low education levels in Wards 7 and 8, this was expected. What was less expected was the critical attitude participants in the story writing process showed toward workforce development programs. Even more surprising was the frequent mention of the need for high quality education for parents and care givers so that they can better support the educational success of the children and young adults in their care. Emotional intelligence, anger management, time management, healthy age-appropriate nutrition, wellness and fitness, outdoor activities, child development, healthy TV- and gaming habits, and learning accountability and respect were frequently mentioned educational needs of parents and care givers. The story therefore exposes divergent views between more generally accepted narratives, and those of local stakeholders in marginalized neighborhoods whose vision tends to be less prominently reflected in accepted narratives.

The life skills focused themes in the education chapter are also reflected in other chapters of the Five Pillars story and outline a vision for education about healthy lifestyles as a basis for improved education outcomes. The education vision foresees parent education classes that are available to residents with school-aged children at no cost; skills development classes are offered at nominal cost; and the D.C. Department of Transportation provides free transportation to the public university system of D.C., including the Community College, the four-year College, and the Law School. The story also stresses the need for stronger links between practical skills and post-secondary education, and between reading-comprehension, quantitative skills and vocational skills. The narrative thus outlines an education system where typically disparate components are linked and easily traversable.

3.1.2. Health

The health chapter of the Five Pillars story stresses prevention over treating illness as the basis for improved health outcomes. Incubator programs that support the launch of wellness clinics, fitness facilities, walking and biking clubs, nutrition coaching, and other

healthy lifestyle related enterprises are prominent in the health chapter. The chapter also mentions easy access to wellness care, primary and family care, and nutrition and exercise as the basis for better lifestyle choices. Yet, while better food access and exercise can play an important role in achieving the vision of wellness outlined in the health chapter, evidence suggests that improving access may not be sufficient. For example, two state-of-the-art primary care facilities in Ward 8, that were funded by tobacco settlement money D.C. had obtained, are well received but not as well attended. A report by the CEO of one of the facilities stated that the settlement money dramatically improved health care access, yet the utilization of the improved access lags behind and needs additional attention. He stated that many residents “... haven’t accessed care as much... people living in poverty have lives that are a little more chaotic, and it’s a little more expensive to get places... that all contributes to not accessing primary care.” [50].

Successful health interventions must therefore focus on the social determinants of health that may stand in the way of preventive care utilization even as access to care improves. A similar distinction is made between food access and food security whereby improved access does not guarantee improved food security [51]. The health chapter of the story emphasizes these connections and also mentions the employment benefits that can accrue from a robust network of health and wellness oriented small businesses and non-profits in the vision of the future.

3.1.3. Social and Cultural Amenities

Initiatives in the social and cultural amenities chapter share common ground with the health chapter of the story. A recurring theme here is a thriving local food economy, which has the potential to improve dietary habits, job opportunities, and links to the innovation economy. For example, soilless food production methods like hydroponics and aquaponics may point the way to improved food access but also to a thriving local restaurant scene and a technology sector that specializes in high intensity automated food production systems. Incentives in the form of startup funds, land access, and tax breaks will be needed to support such a localized food economy, and its production and value-added businesses [49,52].

The story line about a thriving local food economy also recognizes that an urban food system can do more than provide fresh produce for local consumers, restaurants, and food processing businesses. It can also reduce storm water run-off by increasing absorptive surfaces, and mitigate heat islands through vegetation; it can improve public health by changing eating habits; and it can create jobs, and strengthen local supply chains [52,53]. To implement the amenities vision of the story then requires policies that recognize the complex positive externalities of a resilient local food system. For example, research conducted in CAUSES found that the profit margin between produce grown for a local diet, and produce grown for high-end niche markets of micro-greens and edible flowers is substantial. Incentives that compensate urban growers committed to local food production will therefore be indispensable to implement the vision of a thriving food system that does not only create jobs, but also improve local food security and nutritional health.

Other social and cultural amenities prominently featured in the story are an African American History Museum and an Innovation Museum. Both museums build on the rich history of African American entrepreneurship in Washington, D.C. The vision is articulate about linking the two new museums to existing tourist destinations in downtown D.C. For example, the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the Washington, D.C. mall opened its doors in 2016 and has been sold out since then. The amenities chapter of the Five Pillars story argues that this offers opportunities to link invisible neighborhoods and visible downtown destinations through their common focus on the city’s rich African American history.

3.1.4. Environmental Quality and Recreation

The environmental quality vision of the Five Pillars story offers especially compelling ideas including neighborhood-based energy generation and water treatment facilities. Neighborhood-based green initiatives may offer a sweet spot in green business development situated between individual household size systems and large-scale municipal and regional systems. The neighborhood scale enterprises mentioned include a water filtration facility that turns gray and black water into clean potable water and a green energy generation facility that creates enough power to run fifty-plus households off the grid. These examples offer a vision of cutting-edge business development that allows Wards 7 and 8 to become leaders in a neighborhood-based green economy [54,55]. Models for these types of neighborhood scale enterprise exist, yet their implementation will have to be supported by commensurate policies. The District of Columbia offers a lot to build on. For example, an innovative stormwater credit program implemented in 2018 offers incentives to those who make water absorption services available to developers in need of water retention space. A church or school that installs a rain garden on its parking lot to reduce storm water runoff can therefore sell its excess storm water absorption credits to a developer in need of the required storm water retention footprint for a new office building [56].

Pooling households to invest in a collective energy generation or water treatment facility can create opportunities for larger clusters of households to get off the grid and contribute to urban resiliency. Yet, as more households or household clusters generate alternative energy, the grid must be strengthened to balance temporary surplus with temporary deficit periods. Even more challenging may be the water grid. It too needs upgrading and not only in Washington, D.C. but in many urban and metro areas. The technology exists to generate potable water through living machines and blue house facilities that filter black and grey water through a sequence of sediments and plant systems [54,55]. However, permitting issues tend to hinder their implementation. The example also illustrates the level of local expertise represented at the story writing events. It rivals the expertise of credentialed experts, in addition to offering the economic, social, cultural and environmental perspectives of previously excluded stakeholders.

3.1.5. Information and Transportation Access

One of the more immediate needs emerging from the Five Pillars story is the need to establish an easily accessible communication backbone that can disseminate information about the vision captured in the Five Pillars story. A recently launched citizens' initiative, the Ward 8 Economic Development Group [57], can be helpful in disseminating information about the Five Pillars story. Yet, recent experience during the COVID-19 pandemic pointed to significant IT access deficiencies in D.C.'s Wards 7 and 8 neighborhoods. This extends to both the need for improved infrastructure and for more high-quality devices. Implementing the vision of a high-capacity ubiquitous IT backbone that supports, links, and coordinates neighborhood initiatives will therefore require investments at multiple levels. One of the more surprising mentions in story is the need for a 'tech-free' space. This narrative reflects some of the themes of the education and health chapters of the story and mentions the need to un-plug and focus on personal, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being.

The transportation needs of Wards 7 and 8 are masterfully addressed in the fifth chapter of the Five Pillars story. It outlines a vision of a more decentralized transportation system with multiple hubs instead of one downtown hub. The chapter also envisions a flexible transportation system that uses social media hotspots to communicate public transportation schedules, as well as culinary, entertainment, education, and recreation events. For example, regular shuttle services would link the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the Washington, D.C. mall with the neighborhood museums described in the amenities chapter of the story. This shuttle service would also benefit the thriving, ethnically diverse food economy described in the amenities chapter of the story. A starting point may be the expansion of the city's circulator bus to include

destinations in Wards 7 and 8 that are of historical significance and interest to residents and visitors.

3.2. Implications and Next Steps

As this summary of the Five Pillars story shows, the collective vision of Wards 7 and 8 stakeholders outlines viable socially and environmentally sustainable development opportunities. Implementing the vision will require collaborations across a range of issue areas, stakeholders, and scales. This is no small task since several of the initiatives relevant to the Five Pillars story remain firmly embedded in single-issue organizations focused on addressing health disparities, or expanding the city's tree canopies, or increasing bike paths, or adding affordable housing, launching a full-service grocery store and a host of other issues. In contrast, the vision the Five Pillars story outlines cuts across multiple issue areas and requires collaborations between residents, and private, public, and non-profit organizations. Progress towards the vision developed by Wards 7 and 8 stakeholders will therefore require more than the acceptance of the vision. It will also require collaborations across multiple issue areas, organizations, and scales.

Yet, such cross-cutting collaborations should be possible. After all, the impact of expert-led research and proposed strategies is limited only by their level of community competency and ability to reflect the lived experiences of community stakeholders [58]. Similarly, the lack of data at multiple levels of abstraction is a barrier recognized by researchers and practitioners across many fields and scales [59,60]. Authentic community engagement and efforts to structure community-level data into more transferrable categories may offer solutions on both counts. Some local governments and research organizations have recognized these opportunities and have taken steps to address existing data gaps and improve collaborations. An example is the East Baltimore Research Project (EBRP), which is a community-led effort to equip residents with data to produce recommendations for their own neighborhoods [61]. The Five Pillars approach provides the tools that can benefit projects like these and offer policy makers, researchers, and communities anywhere a road map for linking the expertise of local communities to reshape sustainable development outcomes and the measures to track their success.

The funding opportunities available through the Building a Better America bill, which was passed by the U.S. Congress in August of 2022, may also offer opportunities for the integrated, collaborative vision outlined in the Five Pillars story [62]. The bill stresses the need for communities to coordinate efforts across departments (issue areas) and with metropolitan, state, and regional organizations (scale). The bill is explicit about encouraging communities to move beyond past initiatives and to develop projects "... previously considered impossible due to lack of funding or regional coordination" and to exercise "... bold, inclusive thinking" [63]. The Five Pillars approach can provide a framework for such bold and inclusive thinking that can stand on its own or complement other community-based sustainable development and QoL efforts, especially those that seek to address persistent disparities. An especially encouraging example is the 'Reconnecting Communities' initiative in the Building a Better America bill which seeks to reconnect communities that were divided by highways which often destroyed once vibrant neighborhoods in U.S. cities. These misguided infrastructure development projects hit historically disadvantaged communities especially hard. Communities now have the opportunity to engage local stakeholders in rebuilding the environmental, social, cultural, and economic fabric of their communities. Examples in the Five Pillars story of the Wards 7 and 8 neighborhoods in Washington D.C. illustrate how communities might utilize the Five Pillars approach to develop their own bold and inclusive vision.

The Five Pillars approach also highlights the need for more micro-level data. For example, environmental quality data at the neighborhood level is sparse. Indicators in this category are therefore skewed toward recreation rather than environmental quality. To track progress toward the neighborhood-scale water and energy management solutions described in the environment and recreation chapter of the Five Pillars story, new data collection

efforts will have to be initiated. Moreover, policies to advance the community's vision will have to address permitting for off-the-grid water treatment and energy solutions, health policies that accommodate small-scale decentralized treatment facilities, and organizational issues like the collective versus private ownership of the facilities. Similarly, data in the 'information technology and transportation access' pillar are skewed toward transportation since very little data on information-technology are available at the neighborhood level. Adding actionable data at the more disaggregated level of D.C. neighborhoods will require new and ongoing data collection from individual households in addition to relying on data sources at a larger scale that are already available. Thanks to a recent study on health disparities conducted by the D.C. Department of Health and Human Services, the available data on health disparities are relatively strong [64]. However, data to track the accessibility and utilization of the prevention and wellness services that the Five Pillars story highlights remain sparse. These data gaps must be addressed to track progress toward the vision outlined in the health chapter of the Five Pillars story. Better information is also needed on the types of education that feature most prominently in the education chapter of the Five Pillars story such as information about life-skills education, and education for parents and caregivers.

Comparing indicators in the Five Pillars categories across communities can add further benefits since the consistent use of the five categories can highlight commonalities and differences that inform a greater understanding of community needs and assets while recognizing the unique contributions of marginalized communities in shaping their sustainable development vision. To capture the full potential of the Five Pillars approach, it will be essential that the qualitative component of the approach is carried out in areas that offer new perspectives not captured in prevalent social narratives about sustainable community development [11,65].

4. Conclusions

Sustainable development is not an abstract concept. It depends on the ability to communicate the concrete lived development conditions of people and communities. Particularly important is the ability to capture the voices of those who have often been excluded from successful development outcomes and whose lived reality is less prominently reflected in the larger social narrative of sustainable development goals and their success measures. This suggests a tight rope walk between capturing the specific conditions of a community and its development goals and capturing transferable outcomes that can benefit multiple communities.

The Five Pillars approach seeks to bridge this tension. First, the indicators collected in each of the five pillar categories of education, health, social and cultural amenities, environmental quality and recreation, and information and transportation access can help identify proactive measures to improve those areas where disparities and deficits are most glaring. Indicators must be outcome-oriented, proactive, manageable, and diverse enough to track progress across the range of issue areas captured in the Five Pillars categories. Indicators can communicate disparities in assets and deficits, which can facilitate agreement on worthwhile goals and collaborations to ensure progress toward more equitable development outcomes. Ideally, sharing data around the Five Pillar categories will advance a spirit of cooperation and teamwork, or at least a recognition of mutual dependencies. The application of the Five Pillars approach in Washington, D.C. and its eight Wards illustrates persistent disparities in all five categories. Progress toward more equitable development outcomes will depend on improvements in the most serious deficit areas.

The second component of the Five Pillars approach consists of a collective story writing process that captures the development vision of those least represented in past development successes. It moves the development conversation from 'what is' to 'what is possible' and paints a picture of a successful sustainable development future that can be readily communicated. The story written by residents and other stakeholders of the Deanwood and Congress Heights neighborhoods in Washington D.C.'s Wards 7 and 8 is

rife with viable development ideas. The creativity and vision captured in the Five Pillars story is impressive. Especially noteworthy examples are the vision of off-the-grid energy generation and water treatment solutions described in the ‘environment and recreation’ chapter of the story, the emphasis on life skills articulated in the ‘education’ chapter, and the focus on the food system as the centerpiece of local business development described in the ‘amenities’ chapter of the story.

The story writing process is also testament to the significant local expertise and technical knowledge present in the two D.C. neighborhoods. The Five Pillars approach thus provides a focused yet flexible roadmap for engaging the expertise of local stakeholders and brings their lived experience as well as their technical knowledge to the fore. In engaging marginalized members of a local community, the approach challenges persistent assumptions inherent in the dominant narrative of sustainable development and provides opportunities for adjusting mainstream perceptions about existing assets and liabilities. This highlights not only differences, but advantages that become visible as previously invisible experiences that fall outside of the mainstream become visible. By engaging disadvantaged communities as local experts whose vision is indispensable, the Five Pillars approach amplifies their voices and shifts agency of the development process itself. Understanding the perspectives of marginalized residents thus is more than a needed asset. It may well be indispensable to shaping a sustainable development future one community at a time.

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