

# Building a Village in the City

A large city like Dubai or Abu Dhabi is busy and exciting, but as the city grows and people move from place-to-place and job-to-job it can be difficult to create the same sense of community that you find in smaller places. Can we build a village in the big city?

## Big City vs Small Village



Photo by Kostiantyn Stupak: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/timelapse-cityscape-photography-during-night-time-599982/>

Before we spring into action we need to know what we are dealing with. Human beings are social creatures, and having social connections within the community in which you live is important for mental and physical wellbeing. It's considered so important that the World Health Organisation founded a commission in 2024 to investigate the perceived growth in social isolation across the world (<https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection>).

A particular focus of the commission is looking at the difficulty some people have trying to build a sense of community within larger cities – an issue which is covered in detail in this article from New Scientist magazine about a large study in the UK: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2285568-people-living-in-dense-uk-cities-are-more-likely-to-feel-lonely/><sup>1</sup>.

One way to combat this problem is to take lessons from smaller towns and villages and apply what we can to the city.

Let's start off by thinking about what life is like in a city and compare that to what life is like in a village. On two large pieces of paper or a white board create two charts. One for the city and one for a village. On each piece of paper, have a column for 'pros' and a column for 'cons'. Ask your group to identify things they can think of that are good and bad about living in a city and a village.

Here are some prompts to aid thinking:

- ▶ How easy is it to get around or access amenities?
- ▶ How often do people spend time with each other?
- ▶ How busy are people?
- ▶ What is the cost of living like? What effect would that have on people?
- ▶ What is the environment like? How does that affect people and their relationships?
- ▶ What human interactions only happen in a village or a city?
- ▶ What helps develop a sense of community and what can lead to a feeling of isolation?

*Optional activity:* why not turn this into a display? Your group could find images to represent the pros and cons of life in each area so they can see the differences and display them on the wall.

<sup>1</sup> At time of writing there are no similar studies available from the UAE, but the general conclusions in the UK study are applicable to all large cities.



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### Roots & Shoots UAE and the Expo School Programme

This resource was put together by Roots & Shoots UAE in partnership with the Expo School Programme by Expo City Dubai. The Expo School Programme's mission is to inspire the next generation of thinkers and change makers by offering students the knowledge, tools, and platforms needed to foster creativity, innovation, and meaningful collaborations for a sustainable future for all.

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### Get the links

Find all the links used in this resource on our website – scan the QR code or typing this link into your web browser: <https://janegoodall.ae/building-a-village-in-the-city>

# Bringing people together

When communities are smaller, like in a village, people may find it easier to find a common purpose where they live with the people around them. A common purpose can be the key to bringing people together – this is often something which benefits the local community directly, but also, projects that benefit others away from the immediate community, are also great. Let's look at some projects that aim to provide such a common purpose.

## Case Study: Expo City Dubai



Photo by Diego F. Parra: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/terra-the-sustainability-pavilion-dubai-15177926/>

Community projects can often be about getting people involved in something that they can see has a measurable effect on the people, animals and environment of the area where they live and work. Expo City Dubai (ECD) follows a holistic approach to this, and has a number of different projects together that tackle all three of these themes.

Below we've listed a few highlights: you can find full details on all these projects in the ECD sustainability report 2023, which details everything they are doing and its effects on people and their environment: <https://tinyurl.com/3du7mx34>

### Community Waste Management & Food Rescue Programme

As an evolving city with significant footfall all year-round, a substantial amount of waste is generated. A carefully set up waste management scheme and a food rescue programme keeps general waste (that cannot be donated, recycled or composted) to a minimum, resulting in a smarter, cleaner area – check out pages 50-59 of the report for all the details:

- ▶ How is having a community recycling and reuse project in ECD helping grow a sense of community?

### Looking after animals

Caring for animals can also be a great way to foster a sense of community. In ECD there are programmes to get people involved in sustainable agriculture (look at page 75 and 77-79 of the report about the community farm) and to manage the feral cat population by providing shelter, food, health care and a neutering programme (see page 76 – looking after and rehoming stray cats):

- ▶ In what ways do these local projects help grow a village feel in the city community?

### A green and biodiverse space

ECD has a number of green spaces built into its design, with over 90% of it managed without chemicals (read page 73-74 about preserving urban biodiversity).

What benefits does including biodiverse green spaces into an urban environment have for communities? Try include both tangible effects (e.g. cooler temperatures, better air quality) as well as intangible (e.g. more pleasing appearance).

- ▶ How can green spaces in the urban environment be used to benefit communities?

For more information, here is an article from an Australian study about the benefits green spaces in urban planning can have on our physical and mental wellbeing: [tinyurl.com/yecbrbw3](https://tinyurl.com/yecbrbw3)

### Bioblitz

An example of 'citizen science', bioblitzes are a powerful tool for biodiversity conservation, with scientific, educational, and community benefits. Working with experts, members of the public can get hands-on with biodiversity surveys, monitoring species in a specific area at a set time.

The Terra Biodiversity Project ([tinyurl.com/3dujxw9n](https://tinyurl.com/3dujxw9n)) tracks fauna and flora found around The Terra Pavilion in Expo City. This is then added to the global biodiversity database iNaturalist. Engaging the UAE's local communities along with organizations such as Emirates Nature WWF and the Dubai Natural History Group allows for large scale data collection about our local species diversity. Datasets like these are critical for tracking biodiversity trends and can inform regional biodiversity assessments.

The bioblitzes allow the local community to gain firsthand experience with their plants and animals while providing them with plenty of learning opportunities. The project also incorporates traditional ecological knowledge, strengthening the link between local culture and biodiversity conservation.

### Case Study: Local Coops

Of course, it's not just in the UAE that people are building a sense of belonging, there are lessons to be learned from initiatives the world over. Here is an article about a food cooperative in Toronto: [tinyurl.com/mvabdjcp](https://tinyurl.com/mvabdjcp)

In this cooperative, people spend time working in a community garden growing food and are paid in 'Cred' (rather than money) which can be redeemed in a local grocery store, often to buy produce supplied by the community garden.

- ▶ Imagine your local community had a complementary currency like 'Cred'. How would this encourage you to engage more in your local community?

# Plant the seeds of community!

Using the thoughts your group has had around City vs Village and the case studies above, choose one of the following activities which will best suit your group and local area.

## Activity 1: Creating a common local purpose



Photo by Julia M Cameron: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/bearded-man-and-women-sorting-clothes-in-plastic-containers-6994786/>

Engage with your school and local community by organising an event and inviting the neighbourhood. As an example, you could run a swap day:

**Swap day** – On a swap day you invite members of the school and the local community to bring usable items like clothes, toys, games or food and swap these for other items they might need instead. The point of this is not necessarily to save money for your community, but to reduce waste by reusing other people's items that they don't find useful anymore, but still have life left in them.

**Optional extra: Repair Café** – If you have the expertise available, think about starting a 'Repair Café' at the swap day event. A Repair Café is an event where community members bring along broken items that would otherwise be thrown away to be fixed by local people who have the skills to do so. People bring along all manner of things, from a chair with broken legs to radios that no longer function – not everything can be fixed but it's surprising just how much can be. It's an international initiative and you can register your own group and get support here:

<https://www.repaircafe.org/en/>

- ▶ The Group would need to create posters or flyers to hand out and could talk to local businesses to help advertise the community swap day.
- ▶ The swap day can also be used as a launch party for a wider reduce/reuse/recycle scheme that the group can run after the event. This would keep the local community engaged with regular collections days – possibly including a pop-up community cafe!

## Activity 2: Improve your environment



Photo by Kirandeep Singh Walia: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/butterfly-on-yellow-flower-7451404/>

Plan (with permission) and raise money for improving a part of the local area to make it better for community use. This could be as simple as planting a tree, or it could be starting a community garden to invite locals to help with and benefit from.

- ▶ Start by doing a survey of your local area to see what spaces are available for improvement. Your survey could include:
  - ▶ What and how many plants or animals are in different areas.
  - ▶ Amounts of litter in different areas.
  - ▶ Size of different areas
- ▶ After your survey, you need to decide what you might do to improve one of the surveyed areas:
  - ▶ A litter pick? (Make sure you have gloves, suitable clothing and tools)
  - ▶ Plant some suitable vegetation either in the ground or in planters if you can't dig?
- ▶ Once you have finished your group can do regular surveys of the same areas, and report back on what the improvements you made are doing for the area.

### Activity 3: Using your local area



Photo by San Photography: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/coconut-trees-under-clear-blue-sky-8240538/>

Another way of creating a local community is to get out and do things that others can join in with. One great way is to plan some local walks and encourage mindfulness on your journey.

► Firstly, you'll need to plan a walk. Start by locating areas around you with a connection to nature, like a park or the beach or even a tree lined street.

- Try to plan a route that uses some of those spaces, but avoids busy areas in between if possible.
- The walk can involve time to stop at different points to practise mindfulness together. If a few different routes can be planned, then it can become a regular activity for the community to join in with.
- For more information about mindfulness, you can use our nature to the rescue resource: [tinyurl.com/mv75wepj](https://tinyurl.com/mv75wepj)

### Tell us how you got on

When your bee hotel is finished we'd love to see what you have created! Your group leader can upload a story with images to the Roots & Shoots UAE website (find us at [janegoodall.ae](https://janegoodall.ae)). If your school or youth group does not already have an account then just fill in the web form on [janegoodall.ae/join-roots-shoots-uae](https://janegoodall.ae/join-roots-shoots-uae) and we can set you up.



### Keep up to date with Roots & Shoots UAE and the Expo School Programme

You don't have to have an account to keep up to date with what our groups are up to. Head on over to [janegoodall.ae](https://janegoodall.ae) to sign up for our email newsletter packed with all the latest information on what our members in the UAE have been doing.

If social is more your thing then you can also find Roots & Shoots UAE on Facebook at [fb.com/RootsnShoots.ae](https://fb.com/RootsnShoots.ae), on Instagram as [@JaneGoodallUAE](https://@JaneGoodallUAE), and on LinkedIn as "Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots UAE" (direct link: [chk.me/bkGPm7M](https://chk.me/bkGPm7M)). Give the Expo School Programme a follow on Instagram ([@exposchoolprogramme](https://@exposchoolprogramme)), Facebook ([fb.com/ExpoSchoolProgramme](https://fb.com/ExpoSchoolProgramme)) and YouTube (short link: [chk.me/tpuWe7U](https://chk.me/tpuWe7U)).