



The Canadian Rural Partnership: Fostering Vibrant Rural Communities

Introduction

Communities across Canada are learning about what it means to create sustainable work and living spaces for their citizens. Poverty reduction and community revitalization are often the twin driving forces that inspire communities to look for new ways of collaborating across the silos of government, business and the voluntary sector.

Once a revitalization effort is launched, organizers seek operational guidance and structure from outside sources. Vibrant Communities, an action research project operating in 15 Census Metropolitan Areas, has provided a focus and direction for this type of work since 2002. The Pan-Canadian Learning Community it has created links individuals and groups across the country to share their experiences and draw strength and inspiration from the work under way in other centres. Resources have permitted Vibrant Communities to grow steadily over the past five years, but its emphasis has been on larger metropolitan areas. What kinds of support exist for smaller cities and towns across the country?

One of the major issues facing community organizers in smaller centres is gaining access to information which is relevant to their location and demographics. Programs like Vibrant Communities assume the presence of many organizations – government employment offices, community development and philanthropic foundations – that may not be present in smaller cities and towns. However, it is easier to network and collaborate in centres where there are fewer people.

There are many examples of rural communities that have hit upon a winning strategy for revitalization. Kipling, Saskatchewan is profiting from the “one red paper clip” trading-up-to-a-house experiment launched in 2006 by British Columbia resident Kyle MacDonald. Kyle hit upon the idea of using the Internet to trade a simple red paper clip for something of slightly greater value, with the eventual goal of trading up to a house. The Mayor and Town Council of Kipling heard of his project and offered a home in their town in exchange for his next-to-last trade, a part in a film. Once the trade was complete, town organizers in Kipling set up American Idol-style auditions for awarding the movie role. The publicity generated by these events led to the

formation of Kipling Film Productions which residents hope will generate further employment and investment in the town. This example demonstrates the elements of planfulness, serendipity and optimism that characterize community revitalization work.

Supportive structures

The Rural Secretariat, housed within Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, is a partnership among federal departments, provinces and territories which identifies problems faced by rural communities. An Interdepartmental Working Group of some 33 federal departments and agencies helps to gather and disseminate information about the government's involvement in rural development matters. This input has provided a national perspective for the Secretariat's work since its formation in 1996.

The Rural Development Network, a team of federal policy and research workers, was created in the fall of 2005 to promote increased cooperation across federal departments, advance relevant policy options and ensure greater awareness of the challenges facing rural Canada. Coordination at the regional level of each province and territory is ensured by Rural Teams which are composed of representatives from various levels of government and community-based organizations. Each team supports citizens in their efforts to revitalize their communities by acting as a reference, advisor, listener and coach.

In 2006, the Rural Secretariat launched two Internet-based initiatives to support community revitalization efforts. A new website (www.cid-bdc.ca) provides community economic and demographic data primarily from Statistics Canada. A national statistical website, the Community Information Database (CID), serves

as a complementary data set to that already provided by individual provinces and territories. Communities may now access relevant economic and demographic information free of charge which can be used to assist with planning and revitalization.

The Community Information Database is receiving excellent reviews from users. Kate Humpage, Manager of Research and Analysis for the Rural Secretariat, directed the CID's development. By compiling a variety of statistical databases and sources of information into a consistent set of community profiles, cities and towns can assess their progress relative to other regions. Says Kate: "Previously, organizers relied on what they believed they knew about their locations. Once we work with people to interpret the information and they get a clear picture of what's actually happening, they can begin to mobilize their community and develop the tools and strategies they need to get started."

Kate continues: "The Internet provides ready access to data and program information – it represents a huge step forward for far-flung communities. The CID information helps to paint an accurate picture of a community's past and present, but the process of formulating an appropriate pathway rests on the slow, careful work of establishing relationships and connections, and building a shared understanding of how the work will unfold. Mentorship is an essential element of community work."

The Secretariat's website (www.rural.gc.ca) provides information and tools to support revitalization planning. Brenda Cameron Couch, Rural Secretariat Senior Advisor, Rural Communities, and her colleagues in the field have collected case studies which document rural community efforts to deal with serious economic setbacks, such as fishery, mill and mine closures. Each response is unique to the people, geography

and assets of a location, but there are lessons that can act as pointers and markers from which others can learn (see sidebar, page 4). Case studies provide good fuel for thought and help to expand thinking on local issues.

Lessons learned

first, there's the shock

Residents of Trepassey, Newfoundland were devastated when its 724-employee fish plant closed in 1991. They spent considerable time and energy trying to attract another large employer and they continued to look to the federal and provincial governments to ‘fix the problem.’ With time, the residents realized that they knew their community best and recognized that regional initiatives would provide the economic drivers to support their town. An organizing committee is working with others in the region to brand themselves and begin to promote financial and social investment.

leading the way

The key element in any revitalization work is local leadership. Leaders attract other players to improvement efforts. In a rural community, however, municipal governments generally do not have the staff to work in economic development, let alone social development. Linking communities to people with expertise is another dimension of the work undertaken by the Rural Secretariat.

working together, working smarter

Government resource allocation is based on population. Small communities do not have the numbers necessary to easily attract invest-

ment or support. The closure of a main employer, school or health care facility can precipitate a crisis from which it is hard to recover. One response is for small communities to establish links with others in the same region.

Action Southwest, for example, is a strategic economic alliance of businesses, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations and three orders of government – all working to achieve greater economic development in southwest Saskatchewan. It reaches across several municipalities and is building a collective capacity for success. With the goal of developing a regional economy, it is investing in projects and infrastructure (including the establishment of a new regional governance mechanism), focusing on leadership, fostering a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation, and building on the region’s competitive advantages (www.actionsouthwest.net). The Saskatchewan government has set a course to build regional economies across the province and sees Action Southwest as a promising model for regional development.

comparison as an impetus for change

The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs’ “First Impressions – Community Exchange” program was designed to use curiosity and comparison as spurs to community improvement. Members of twinned towns supply teams of six or eight volunteers. Each team makes unannounced visits to the opposite town and members are given the task of reviewing facilities and services through the eyes of a business person, newcomer, tourist, young family member, individual with a disability or retired person. Each team prepares a report on the opposite community’s strengths and shortcomings, and shares the findings in a safe environment. One of the unintended outcomes

of First Impressions is that the volunteers who travel together – and who may not have known one another very well before the experience – often find that they want to work together afterwards to bring new ideas or services to their home communities.

Saskatchewan's Department of Regional Economic and Co-operative Development, in partnership with Action Southwest and several other organizations, has recently undertaken a First Impressions pilot project in southwest Saskatchewan.

one good idea leads to another

By directing attention to other community-based programs, the Rural Secretariat encourages organizers to create linkages and networks with people working in the area of community revitalization. This type of learning and connecting supports innovative programming.

Natural Resources Canada's Forest Communities Program (FCP) is one such initiative [Makhoul 2006]. Launched in 1991 as the Canadian Model Forest Program, this updated project will shortly begin applying lessons learned about sustainable forest management from an environmental perspective and applying them to the social and economic dimensions of sustainability. The 11 forest region management structures are reviewing, renewing and expanding partnerships with rural communities in preparation for FCP's rollout in spring 2007.

Another excellent source of information on partnership development, processes and funding opportunities is available through the Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CEDNet). Operating through federal regional economic development agencies – Western

Accomplishments and challenges

Local solutions to local challenges

The *Township of North Dumfries* is one of four rural townships in the Region of Waterloo, Ontario. In 2004, residents established the North Dumfries Community Development Network (ND CDN) to provide a forum for sharing ideas that could lead to positive community change. One of their most cherished goals was to foster positive relationships among different age groups. An Intergenerational Mini-Grant Program channelled \$10,000 to five projects, which included community clean up, the development of a garden and the painting of a mural. In all, 300 people (mainly youth and seniors) were involved in the work. Members of ND CDN came to appreciate that: a) problems and solutions need to be defined by the community; b) all communities have assets and resources they can use; c) more can be achieved by working together than by working alone; and d) community building is multifaceted – no single initiative can make a fundamental difference to well-being.

In for the long haul

Nelson, BC, is well known for its beauty and small-town charm. Nonetheless, it faces a wide variety of challenges – from an aging population and the fifth lowest population growth forecast in BC, to Pine Beetle infestations and lack of agreement over the best ways to promote growth and opportunity. The Nelson Economic Development Partnership (NEDP) was established in 2005 as an equal collaboration between the City of Nelson, the Chamber of Commerce and Community Futures. The trust and cooperation that have grown among the partners of this unique economic development arrangement have resulted in better service delivery and improved leveraging of resources. The NEDP has launched several successful short-term initiatives and established five

Economic Diversification, Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, Canada Economic Development for Québec Region, Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency – CEDNet is a nonprofit organization whose members encourage the development of comprehensive, participatory solutions to community development.

The Rural Secretariat's own Models Program was based on a decision to take 21 initiatives operating in small communities and try to replicate them elsewhere. The idea is to evaluate whether initiatives in a range of areas, including parenting, child care, governance and leadership, were indeed applicable to other communities. In 2008, the results of this work will demonstrate the possibilities for programs and policies which can further support rural revitalization efforts (www.rural.gc.ca).

There are also some exciting initiatives being undertaken by postsecondary institutions in rural areas which support rural revitalization efforts. Several colleges and universities are involved in the Models Program, including Sudbury-based *Collège Boréal*, Nova Scotia Community College, *Université Rurale Québécoise* and Lethbridge Community College. To support regional planning efforts, Canadore College has struck an agreement with the Georgian Bay Biosphere Region to establish itself as a destination point for skills training and accreditation. Sir Sandford Fleming College in Peterborough, Ontario, has been supportive of the arts community and established the Haliburton School of the Arts at its northern campus in Haliburton. It launched a summer program that attracts thousands of people each year. Other courses are developed in response to community needs (such as ecotourism and sustainable construction).

priority areas for the 2005-08 period. The partnership demonstrates the focus on desired outcomes and commitment it requires to advance revitalization work. Members continue to work to meet community expectations, maintain partner and community support, withstand change in personnel and political shifts, and align strategy with opportunity.

Harnessing community spirit

Upper Stewiacke in Nova Scotia's Colchester County, population 1,540, is located 90 minutes from Halifax and 40 minutes from the nearest town. Agriculture and lumber industries are the community's main employers. Recognizing the fragility of the local economic base, a diverse group of residents decided to use Upper Stewiacke's self-reliant spirit to stimulate local social and economic development. A community exposition held in 2004 was so successful that residents decided to form the Upper Stewiacke Community Development Association. Six priority areas were identified and the first four – economic development, seniors' and health issues, recreation and culture, and efforts to retain the local elementary school – became the basis of collaborative efforts to revitalize the community. Residents are particularly proud of the newly-created Stewiacke Valley Farmers' Market and the purchase of land for a park. Reports on the first phase of work were completed in late 2006. These will help inform work on two other areas of interest – communication, and long-term planning and employment opportunities.

Relationships take time

For ten years, members of ***Miawpukek First Nation*** in Newfoundland have worked with partners to balance traditions and history with a shared vision of what the community should look like in the future. In that time, the

From isolated success stories to a movement for change

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Rural Secretariat raises awareness of rural issues and assists outlying communities. It supports planning efforts by providing community organizers with data and helping them look at alternative ways of improving their decision-making processes. As it builds greater understanding of community engagement and sustainability, the Secretariat's successes have led to greater demands on its staff and resources.

Says Brenda Cameron Couch: "The interest in community revitalization work has increased enormously over the last few years, in part because of programs like Vibrant Communities and the federal government's growing interest in reaching beyond departmental silos. The Secretariat's rural teams have worked well with provincial government representatives and voluntary sector organizations in the regions, and this collaboration has become an important vehicle for supporting rural communities. When we all ask what we can do collectively, the response is nothing short of astounding."

Anne Makhoul

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Reference

Makhoul, A. (2006). *Forest Communities Program*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, October.

reserve's two client groups – those living on reserve and those in the surrounding area – began to enjoy the benefits and potential associated with capacity development. This lesson demonstrates clearly the time it can take to properly align relationships and expectations in order to create impetus for change.

When it's good, it's great

Ogema, Saskatchewan, is a town of 300 located 90 minutes southwest of Regina. By adopting the notion that employment is built one small business at a time, residents now identify themselves as Canada's number one place in per capita job creation (they have created 75 jobs in the last four or five years). The residents' attitude is that there is nothing they cannot do. One councillor and the Mayor are strong champions of the revitalization work, but the town has a well-distributed leadership and makes it a priority to include as many residents and organizations as possible. One councillor summed up Ogema's efforts by saying: "We're having way too much fun."

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