



community stories

April 2009

ISBN: 1-55382-306-0

Newfoundland and Labrador: Innovative Strategies in Government-Community Collaboration

Introduction

In May 2008, the Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador brought together government policy shapers, community leaders, academics and experts from outside the province to participate in a Symposium entitled *Innovative Strategies in Government-Community Collaboration: Voluntary Sector and Citizen Engagement in Public Policy Development*. The Symposium was convened to share research findings from the CSC-Memorial University Values Added Community University Research Alliance (CURA), which focused on the implementation of *People, Partners and Prosperity: A Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador* (1998-2004). The Strategic Social Plan, dismantled in 2004, provided the foundation for Newfoundland and Labrador's current Rural Secretariat. The event also provided an opportunity for participants to hear from several Canadian experts about their work in the area of government-community collaboration and to engage in discussion on that topic.

An ambitious experiment, the Strategic Social Plan (SSP) called for involvement of the voluntary, community-based sector and citizens in policy formulation. The overall goal was to effect a shift from remedial social programs to responses that would meet locally identified needs and maximize local strengths and assets [Powers, Locke and Felt 2006: 6]. Very revealing at the Symposium were comments from some senior and retired civil servants that, in spite of missing links identified in the *Values Added* research and the early deconstruction of the SSP, considerable shifts have in fact taken

This story is one of a series that describes work done by members of a community of practice that was established to explore community-government collaborations on policy. Funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, the community of practice developed policy tracking procedures and produced a "Collaboration on Policy" manual. Visit www.caledoninst.org for more details of this 13-month initiative.

place within government, signalling that the underpinning values and objectives of the SSP are taking root. This shift is evidenced in an increased focus on horizontal policy planning, community collaboration and integrated place-based development. Examinations of recent provincial strategies, for example, for Healthy Ageing, Wellness, Poverty Reduction, Violence Prevention, Cultural Initiatives, Sport and Recreation, and Immigration bring to light many SSP principles. There are also cross-references among some of the strategies and often several departments are involved.

The development of the SSP took place in the 1990s, when the province saw the cod fishery collapse, fishery-based communities wither and a focus within government on deficit reduction. School closures, government downsizing, reductions in community funding and social changes – low birth rates, an aging population, high out-migration, homes abandoned – seemed to promise only more decline. As early as 1985, the Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador (CSC) had recognized that piecemeal policy interventions were not adequate to tackle the social pressures being felt in communities throughout the province and called repeatedly on the government to develop a social plan to work in conjunction with the economic planning then under way.

In 1993, Premier Clyde Wells established a strategic planning group composed of his chief of staff and deputy ministers to begin devising a social plan. In 1996, a non-governmental group – the Social Policy Advisory Committee – was tasked with province-wide consultations with the public and key community organizations, and with writing a report. Two years later, in 1998, the Strategic Social Plan was released. Government set up six Regional Steering Committees composed of representatives from service delivery agencies (including health and school boards, regional government offices and postsecondary institutions), municipalities, economic development boards and voluntary organizations. The Committees, with the six Regional Planners, were responsible for taking the pulse of their local communities, including voluntary and non-profit groups, and gathering input that would form the basis of responsive social policies. They were to foster regional partnerships and create linkages between the community and government.

In addition, a Premier's Council on Social Development was established. Meant as an advisory body that would funnel information to the provincial Cabinet, this group formed several *ad hoc* committees – one of which later oversaw development by the Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency of Community Accounts, the province's impressive and extensive statistical database (see page 3). A Secretariat was set up within Executive Council, headed by an Assistant Deputy Minister. This office assumed a leadership role in the facilitation of interdepartmental collaboration. Deputy Minister Committees and interdepartmental partnerships were established to create horizontal lines of communication within government and encourage coordinated program and policy design.

Weaknesses were apparent in the mechanisms created for SSP implementation. The Premier's Council on Social Development was not linked closely to either the SSP Regional Steering Committees or the voluntary sector. No mechanism existed to channel information up from the grassroots. Though consultation had convinced the government that the SSP was a popular concept, no one had a clear vision of how local needs and ideas could be brought to the highest levels of government, nor how to change the bureaucratic culture in order to allow this to happen. *Values Added* research revealed that the public lacked knowledge of the SSP; linkages and community

outreach were weak; and the voluntary sector and government still largely operated in silos. Involving members of the community-based sector in policy development requires a new set of skills and understanding on both sides. Lack of capacity and resources to build bridges, complexity and longevity issues hindered implementation. Innovative policy instruments require different operating procedures and long-term investment. Convincing Deputy Ministers with big budget departments to sacrifice autonomy and reallocate resources is hard to do, particularly in a province with a long history of highly centralized, hierarchical governance. [Locke, Powers, Felt and Close 2006: 1].

There was no mechanism designed specifically for the purpose of linking the SSP Committees to the upper levels of government. Although the SSP Office ensured that a member of the executive of government sat on each regional SSP committee and made attempts to encourage horizontal approaches within the executive, there was no formal mechanism to hear integrated regional advice, to respond collaboratively across departments to regional needs, and to jointly manage regional initiatives and investments [Close 2007: 6].

A new administration dismantled the SSP, but on its foundation created a Rural Secretariat emphasizing long-term visioning and rural sustainability. Nine Regional Councils made up of individuals (not organizational representatives) and a Provincial Council (regional representatives plus other community leaders) provide vehicles for engagement.

Lessons about collaboration

The traditional top to bottom, funder-to-client model runs counter to the ideal of including the knowledge and experience of the community sector, as expressed by proponents of the Strategic Social Plan. Perhaps a helpful analogy would be to imagine a coffee percolator where ideas and energy from the bottom blend with horizontally aligned government priorities and funding to create a satisfying product – healthy, lively communities.

Successful multisectoral collaborations have advantages over hierarchies, such as flexibility, innovation, specialization and speed. A review of the relevant literature concludes that place-based collaborative governance requires the following elements to succeed [Locke, Powers, Felt and Close 2006: 3]:

- cultural and structural transformation across government – a new type of decision-making, leadership which facilitates horizontal collaboration, the overcoming of ‘turfism,’ the empowerment of front-line people, programs which are flexible and responsive
- executive level commitment
- skilled network managers
- human and social capital/community capacity/inclusion
- linkage mechanisms
- longevity – at the end of the day, SSP implementation lasted only five to six years.

Community Accounts in Newfoundland and Labrador

Community Accounts evolved from the province's Strategic Social Plan and is an innovative information system providing users at all levels with a reliable source of neighbourhood, community, regional and provincial data. Community Accounts provide information normally not readily available, too costly to obtain, or too time consuming to retrieve and compile (www.communityaccounts.ca).

This data is a powerful resource partly because it has been developed by the Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency along with colleagues from Memorial University of Newfoundland. The information it contains can be used to plan interventions and establish a reliable accounting system to track social and economic progress after changes have been made. Accessed by government, regional bodies, communities, postsecondary educational institutions, media and private citizens, Community Accounts are now embedded as a standard provincial resource.

A report available on the Community Accounts site documents examples of how information has been used. These include:

- The Department of Health and Community Services used Community Accounts to identify communities in which youth were deemed to be “at risk.” This information enabled the department to target its programs more effectively. Managers indicated that the quality and timeliness of staff analysis improved markedly by accessing the Community Accounts.
- The Recreation Liaison for the City of Corner Brook requested access to neighbourhood data to enhance community recreation planning and implementation of programs and services.
- The Kids Eat Smart Program used Community Accounts to locate relevant data to help assess local needs. The information allowed them to determine the funding allocations to each community.
- An entrepreneur in Labrador used Community Accounts to see how many children between ages 6 and 12 lived in a designated area to determine if there was a market for an after-school child care program.

In 2001, Community Accounts staff began to develop a Market Basket Measure (MBM) of poverty for Newfoundland and Labrador. This is a measure of the actual cost of a basket of essential goods and services, adjusted by community and family size. It provides a fixed reference point (or absolute point) against which to measure the adequacy of household income, and serves as an important complement to existing relative income measures such as the low income cut-off produced by Statistics Canada. Recognizing that living costs are not consistent across the province, the NLMBM uses Community Accounts capacity to display community and neighbourhood level information. The NLMBM will be used to track the incidence, depth and severity of poverty. Release is expected in 2009.

To date, the community-to-government linkage mechanism remains the critical ingredient for successful community-government collaboration. How does government develop a new kind of high-level understanding about place-based governance and what it needs to succeed, encourage emerging champions with a shared vision of change and learn all of this in concert with communities?

The Strategic Social Plan teaches us that governments help collaboration when they:

- clearly articulate new approaches
- reduce program rules and are responsive to creative solutions
- consult and share decision-making
- duplicate horizontal committee models in government
- match policies to regional needs
- give more authority to regional committees
- coordinate the merger of social and economic development
- use collaborative project operations and governance models to influence government departments
- continually review collaborative project committee membership to get the ‘right’ members
- value regional input and development
- are more inclusive and open
- are willing to change their own practices [Powers, Locke, Felt and Close 2006: 13-14].

By contrast, governments hinder collaboration when they provide inconsistent engagement opportunities, change through elections or movement of officials, provide uncertain mandates, and operate over large distances.

The evolution of ideas

Though the Strategic Social Plan implementation structures were dismantled, the SSP left a considerable legacy. Its basic notion that communities could and should direct self-improvement initiatives led to the development of a social audit by which communities could access data about their social policy needs. The information gathered on employment, demographic trends and health indicators is now housed in Community Accounts.

Current Premier Danny Williams promised during his 2003 election campaign that he would take a comprehensive, government-wide, long-term approach to poverty reduction. In 2004, he committed his government to a 10-year process that would see Newfoundland and Labrador, then the poorest province in Canada, achieve the country’s lowest poverty rates. The province’s poverty reduction strategy, *Reducing Poverty: An Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador* (2006), espouses a broad and integrated approach that engages community partners and all orders of government, indicating influence, if not inspiration, by the Strategic Social Plan, “which itself was the result of years of research, advocacy and community-government collaboration. Some of the main

The Rural Secretariat

Building on the strengths of the Strategic Social Plan (SSP), and following through on a 2003 election promise, the Williams administration established the Rural Secretariat early in 2004 and allowed a year for development and transition to take place. Community stakeholders pushed for an increase in the number of regions from six under the SSP to nine, while the province changed the makeup of the regional bodies from institutional and organizational representatives to individual citizens from various communities. By 2005, there had been an open nomination process for members and 133 people appointed. In their first year, the Regional Councils were tasked with developing long-term visions for their regions.

Two members of each Regional Council, and other community leaders, serve on a Provincial Council, which meets twice a year with Cabinet and with a Deputy Ministers' Committee. These volunteer participants are one component of the Rural Secretariat. The second includes a Secretariat office within Executive Council with six staff, headed by an Assistant Deputy Minister, and 10 Partnership Planners in the nine regions. The Secretariat office works with the Regional and Provincial Councils to convene learning events and implement community-based research, which inform the advice submitted to government. Overall, the Secretariat works to ensure that citizen and stakeholder voices are considered by government officials in decision-making and policy-development. It has a mandate to:

- promote the well-being of all regions of Newfoundland and Labrador through a comprehensive and coordinated approach to economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects of regional development
- act as the focal point for government to work with local and regional partners to build strong and dynamic regions and communities
- ensure that regional concerns are considered throughout the provincial government and promoted at the federal level
- carry out research and analysis of economic and social issues affecting all regions of Newfoundland and Labrador
- help communities and regions identify and take advantage of growth opportunities.

The vision of the Rural Secretariat is of sustainable regions with healthy, educated, prosperous people living in safe, inclusive communities. It is guided by the principles of:

- *Shared Responsibility*: Responsibility for solutions is shared among individuals, communities, regions and government; ideas and decisions are equally shared.
- *Sustainable Development*: Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
- *Inclusion*: Everybody has the opportunity to participate in and benefit from sustainable development.
- *Measuring Progress*: Measuring economic, social and environmental progress.
- *Affordable*: Living within our means.

The Secretariat has two main areas of focus: working directly with citizens through the Councils to identify policies and programs that advance or hinder the long-term sustainable development of the regions and the province; and working within government to advance an understanding of issues affecting rural areas.

social policy players both within and outside Government have worked over decades and through changes in elected administrations to achieve a more integrated, community-based strategy for social and economic development” [Locke with Rowe forthcoming: ii]. Investments under the Poverty Reduction Action Plan now total about \$100 million annually. Biennial consultations and a 2008 *Progress Report* are in development. Community Accounts works closely with the Poverty Reduction Strategy Division.

Newfoundland’s voluntary sector has become increasingly well recognized since the 1980s. The province now has a Minister and Secretariat of the Voluntary and Non-profit Sector within Executive Council. There exists a Provincial Violence Prevention Initiative, Regional Wellness Coalitions, and a Vibrant Communities St. John’s, among other collaborations.

The nine new Rural Secretariat Regional Councils are neither agency nor institution-based. They are composed of outstanding individuals from the region and charged with creating a regional vision to 2020. Two members of each Regional Council, along with other community leaders, serve on a Provincial Council, which meets with Cabinet twice a year. Cautious optimism for the process is tempered by concerns that no vehicle yet exists for moving the regional visions to action.

Community issues tend to run into a policy wall. Only through dialogue between community members and policy-makers can local knowledge contribute to policy development [Locke, Powers, Felt and Close 2006:3].

Last words

Penelope Rowe at the Community Services Council learned many lessons about cultural change and effective collaboration through the SSP and other policy development work. Says Penelope: “Collaboration doesn’t mean that everyone agrees all the time. In fact, waiting for full consensus can be detrimental. Bringing likely opponents and people affected directly by policy decisions into the work early on introduces a necessary edginess which can help ensure that good policy – rather than comfortable relationships – are the outcome.”

Fran Locke, Penelope Rowe and Anne Makhoul

Reducing Poverty: An Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador

Following through on a 2003 election promise, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador released its comprehensive, government-wide poverty reduction strategy in 2006. Administered by a Division within the Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment, and guided by a Ministerial committee, a Deputy Ministers Committee and an Interdepartmental Working Group, the Action Plan seeks to prevent, reduce and alleviate poverty. High-level support and leadership for the Plan reflect widespread recognition that government must coordinate its approach across departments. The strategy seeks to build on previous poverty reduction initiatives. Despite a relatively small public service, the Government has set five goals for its poverty reduction Action Plan:

1. improved access and coordination of services for those with low income
2. stronger social safety net
3. improved earned incomes
4. increased emphasis on early childhood development
5. better educated population.

Among its accomplishments to date, the Government cites:

- institution of a low-income prescription drug program
- elimination of school fees and provision of free textbooks for all grades
- enhancements to and expansions of civil legal aid and family justice services
- increases to and indexation of Income Support
- reductions in the Income Support caseload
- increased funding and expansion of Community Youth Networks
- changes in rent-g geared-to-income scale for working tenants and those aged 55 and over in social housing
- rise in the number of children in subsidized licensed child care spaces
- increase in the number of employed Income Support clients
- more affordable housing units.

The first round of biennial consultations took place in 2008 and a *Progress Report* is in development, along with a Newfoundland and Labrador Market Basket Measure through Community Accounts and the Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency.

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