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**A Conversation
About
Community Development**

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
WORKSHOP

August 1997



Centre for the Study of Co-operatives
University of Saskatchewan



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Cover and logo design by Byron Henderson
Editing, interior layout, and design by Nora Russell
ISBN 0-88880-360-5

NOTE: The list of participants in the workshop that resulted in this document are listed on page 13. The sections titled “The Need for Community Development” and “Where to Begin” were contributed by Brett Fairbairn, and he and Murray Fulton composed the exercise on pages 10-12. The synthesis, writing, and editing of the day’s discussion were done by Nora Russell.

Printed in Canada

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A Conversation About Community Development

PREAMBLE

This document is a compilation of comments and exchanges concerning community development made during a one-day workshop at Wanuskewin Heritage Park near Saskatoon on 13 May 1997. To some extent the following still reflects the flow of the conversation, the questions and answers, the reactions and nuances, that arose from the interaction among the participants.

We have left it in this form because in many respects this is an effective representation of the many-faceted and indeterminate nature of community development.

The Need for Community Development

Community development involves a set of alternative approaches to promoting community vitality and sustainability. Individuals and groups explore these approaches when conventional planning and development are not working or are not sufficient. As long as private entrepreneurs or existing organizations are meeting all of a community's needs—or as long as governments can be convinced to step in and do so—there seems to be little need for community development. People typically undertake community development when everything else has failed, when they are facing what appear to be intractable long-term problems. This is both a strength and a weakness. The magnitude of the problems is usually daunting. It may be difficult to believe that anything can make a difference. On the other hand, it is precisely the nature of the problems that makes it possible to motivate, involve, and unite people in finding solutions. Community development goes back and forth between large dreams and small practical steps, long-term strategies and short-term projects that together do make a difference.

The key to community development is this: It is surprising and unpredictable. Community development means the development of people and of new connections among them. When citizens become genuinely involved, when people take on new roles and pursue new thoughts, you never know where it will lead. It may involve redefining what “the community” is: where it begins and ends; who its members are. Community development usually means drawing in groups that have previously been marginalized in decisions and projects—often it is among such groups that the greatest untapped potential lies. Frequently it involves re-examining assumptions about what “development” really is. Does a community necessarily become more “developed” when average wealth increases? Can it become more developed while average wealth remains unchanged? Easy assumptions about what wealth is and where it comes from may have to be reconsidered.

In every case, pursuing community development requires two kinds of courage. First, the courage to face problems whose existence people may want to deny. And second, the courage not to try to solve those problems single-handedly, but instead, to believe in people. It requires some faith to embark on an open-ended process, with no preconceived results, while hoping and expecting that local citizens will find those results for themselves.

The Essentials of Community Development

1. The total community must be taken into account.
2. There must be a balance of social and economic sectors.
3. Local self-help should be emphasized.
4. Meaningful citizen participation should be encouraged.
5. Sustainable projects should be given priority.
6. Consider the disenfranchised and avoid adverse affects upon them.
7. Citizens should learn from their project experience.
8. Leadership should be shared.

Taking these things into account will build upon and improve the strengths of the community and its citizens, and further, will contribute to personal and community empowerment through the development of new attitudes and skills. Number eight is a key element, with the caveat that the traditional leadership role requires some changes and improvements—its evolution should encompass a new, more inclusive style—this change is critical to the long-term survival of the province.

The Essentials of the Multicommunity Collaboration Process

1. Communities need valid reasons to become partners.
2. All partners must recognize the value and benefits of partnership.
3. Adequate time must be given for orientation, planning, and implementation. Don't be too results-oriented; be patient; allow time for

things to happen; thrive on small successes early; build them in for positive reinforcement. Allow the communities some input into timelines, but help them be realistic and sit down at intervals to reflect on accomplishments. Sometimes people are too close to recognize them as such.

4. Boundaries, both real and metaphorical, should relate to program interests. All parties need to be clear about what the boundaries are; they need to know if they are adjustable. If they aren't, they need to know that too. You must establish your criteria clearly from the outset, but you also have to be aware that the parties can think beyond the boundaries.
5. You need to establish a sound funding base, and make clear what it is as well.
6. You need early support from government leaders at every level—councillors, mayor, reeve, MLA, etc.—and should involve them in the earliest meetings. This helps to avoid innuendo and rumours. Go to informal community leaders as well; they are not always on council. You need to know the community extremely well; ask people in the community who should be at the table; they won't necessarily be in entrenched positions; consider age, gender, experience, etc. Don't rely solely on local governments or you will miss valuable resources. Look for diversity in your leaders, and keep leadership within the community.
7. Provide adequate staff support.
8. Leadership training is essential, but don't call it that formally or you will put people off. Build it into the process.
9. Leadership should be shared among community partners—a rotating chair, co-chairs, or different people with a variety of skills and interests taking over certain areas. This helps with shared responsibility as well.
10. External support is important but should be periodic; there should be a common thread that is internal.
11. Emphasize win/win results. What can we all win at together?
12. Celebrate successes; allow failures to provide a learning experience—give them a positive spin.

It's extremely important to have a shared vision between/among communities, and a firm commitment to the process, i.e., to attending all the meetings. And despite all these positive points for guiding the process, recognize the inevitability of conflict at some point and decide in advance how you are going to deal with it. You must deal with it up front and not let things fester. You're better off to let people vent at the outset and get it over with.

You need to begin by defining what community development is. It's not just putting a smokestack or a hog barn in every community. If you can't define at the outset what you want, how are you going to measure results? People have different concepts of what it's about; you need a common understanding among all the stakeholders before you can proceed effectively.

It's more than adapting; it's creating something new to deal with existing realities. To call it adapting suggests something more passive—reacting to something rather than actively pursuing a creative solution.

You need to look at what kind of jobs you're creating in communities as well. Consider working conditions, quality of jobs, quality of life, and avoid the temptation to go with a panacea. There's much more at stake than simply bringing a whole lot of low-skill, low-paying jobs into a community that will maintain the us/them situation of those who own it and those who work for it. There is a real need to stress common interests.

Community development is really about the development of people. In the SCRAD rural futures project, for example, participants had to commit to a series of meetings, not just a large town hall meeting where everyone vents and goes away. You need to engender a commitment to the process and encourage broad visioning at the beginning. The process needs to be as open-ended as possible in one sense, but should also have

clear boundaries, though not too many. People need to feel they can follow through their own priorities and visions.

With this type of intercommunity co-operation and collaboration you're really trying to promote a new community. The old communities don't have the critical mass to be viable any longer, so you must find some way to redefine the community so everyone is involved, and all the communities in a particular area or region, for example, become a new community.

This development usually occurs in small groups, i.e., kitchen meetings, the more formal study club, which involves research and presentations, or things like talking circles and pods. This type of situation creates the responsibility for everyone around the table to talk, and is a less confrontational means of dealing with discussions. It makes things more inclusive and can involve everyone in the community.

It's important that the groups who participate do their own research. It's no good having professionals do it for them, though they can certainly provide guidance.

Creating networks is also important. You have to encourage people to develop networks and connections—within communities, between communities, and to the outside. So what you're really doing is giving people connections to others in order to help themselves solve problems.

You must plan the communication process carefully. All the stakeholders need to be kept clearly informed at every stage, and there needs to be follow-up after every meeting. Newspapers could play a role here, informing the outside world about what is happening in particular communities.

It's also important that the process be seen as democratic, as well as

voluntary and collaborative. But you need to reach a consensus rather than coming to a voting process, which implies a win/lose situation. And you need to allow divergent views to arise, even encourage them to be voiced. They need to be out in the open and often offer a new way to look at the situation, even though they may be in conflict with the majority of stakeholders.

From time to time take a reality check. What are you really doing in each particular situation? It has to be clear that you're not giving communities things; you're not causing growth; you're not handing out solutions. You must be careful not to create unrealistic expectations. Communities must figure out how to grow and prosper themselves in adapting to change and managing their own futures. They need to manage their own expectations as well. The community development process does not necessarily entail the delivery of good news. Communities need to understand that they have to do this themselves. Most of them likely do understand this.

Where to Begin?

Community development processes have a typical sequence of stages. These stages are not arbitrary, but rather reflect the underlying logic of what needs to go on in the community. People need to be involved. They have to be involved over a substantial period of time in order to permit growth, development, making new connections, and establishing trust and understanding. They need some common motivation or inspiration that permeates and co-ordinates what otherwise would be disconnected and fragmented initiatives by separate groups and individuals. These considerations have many implications for how community development should be structured.

Typically, the first important step is to define the problem or problems. It is not enough for a few people to decide what the problem is. The key is for all of the community's key stakeholders to agree on a common view of the problem.

Logically, the next step is to generate commitment to a process. A large cross-section of the community has to buy in to something that is more extended than a “one-off” event. In today’s world, people usually won’t buy in unless there is the right combination of structure and open-endedness: structure to convince them the process will lead to something useful; open-endedness to persuade them that their involvement can affect the outcome. This usually means working from a process orientation rather than a results orientation, which predetermines the outcome and invalidates participation.

Visioning is central to every community development process, in one form or another, because it defines the common values and inspiration for all the participants. Community members must be freed to dream a little about what they want for their community. In doing this, they define what is essential about their community, what they want to enhance or preserve. Later on, this will be a practical help for selecting strategies and maintaining consensus.

Visioning meets reality in the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This is where community participants identify factors and trends that reinforce their vision, and those that undermine it. They determine which factors and trends are most subject to their own influence—and this leads to specific strategies.

Strategies, goals, objectives, targets, and tasks follow from the community consensus. It all does come down to action in the end: specifications by specific people, groups, organizations, and institutions. An action might be a group of people launching a new service; an existing organization making operational decisions to suit the community plan; a local government changing one of its policies to give an incentive to some activity; a citizens’ group lobbying a senior government for some specific change . . . or any one of a hundred other possibilities. The essential point is that the activities be selected within a loose, community-based strategic plan in such a way that they reinforce each other and serve common purposes.

Here are three metaphors for a community-development process. You can visualize it as a funnel: wide at the top, bringing in every possible community member and group, every idea, every hope and

dream, and narrowing down to very specific actions. It is equally valid to visualize it as a circle, because community development is never truly complete. Every successful action leads to evaluation, new analysis of problems and opportunities, new initiatives by community members. Successful community development is the opposite of a vicious circle: perhaps it's something of a self-sustaining upward spiral. Or you can visualize it as a tree. Community development is a living process rooted in and nourished by the community at large. It has a core based on a solid shared vision, growing into branching objectives that periodically bear fruit.

Funnel, circle, tree: whatever metaphor you may prefer, community development has to proceed by stages, in a planned but open-ended way, to unlock the community's potential to influence its own future.

Community and Economic Development Strategies: An Exercise

Please rank each of the following according to how well you think it fulfills the purpose and definition of community development (from 1 = “not at all” to 3 = “not sure” to 5 = “an outstanding example”). You may also answer “it depends,” but in that case, jot down a note about what it depends on! You might want to discuss your answers with others.

- _____ 1. Local citizens negotiate large senior-government subsidies for their ailing primary industry.
- _____ 2. Local churches establish an interfaith council to facilitate interdenominational events and positions on local issues.
- _____ 3. Members of a marketing club use their dues to conduct product-related research.
- _____ 4. A local business announces a plant expansion, creating ten jobs for highly skilled engineers.
- _____ 5. The local welfare office redirects social-assistance funds to pay seven willing individuals to do community improvements.
- _____ 6. Local merchants organize a “buy local” campaign.
- _____ 7. Eight local women start a quilting co-operative.
- _____ 8. The town council attracts a business away from the next town down the road, using a large package of tax reductions, utility subsidies, and publicly funded infrastructure improvements.
- _____ 9. Local citizens form an investors club to play the stock market.
- _____ 10. Local Finnish Canadians open a heritage language school.
- _____ 11. A local Indian band obtains a large block of nearby land from the federal government as settlement for unfulfilled treaty obligations.

- _____ 12. The town council hires a specially trained business development officer.
- _____ 13. Local consumers get together with a local farmer to set up a community garden on the farmer's land, managed by the farmer with input from the consumers, who commit to buy the produce.
- _____ 14. The local arts board organizes a Shakespearian festival.
- _____ 15. Twelve local families start a funeral co-operative.
- _____ 16. Local Chinese Canadians open a Buddhist temple to attract more Chinese families.
- _____ 17. The economic development officer writes a column in the local weekly paper that provides business training ideas.
- _____ 18. The main elevator company, which has decided to close three elevators, is persuaded to keep one open in a centre that has been targeted by the region as a commercial-services hub.
- _____ 19. Local artists form an association to press for the creation of a regional cultural centre.
- _____ 20. A Hutterite colony divides and buys a block of local land for its new community.
- _____ 21. The local rail line, which was being closed, is taken over by a consortium of farmers, community organizations, and local people.
- _____ 22. A local farmer digs up a dinosaur skeleton.
- _____ 23. A large hog processor signs up local producers to contracts for management and delivery.
- _____ 24. Local environmental activists form an organization to conduct public education and press for environmental protection.
- _____ 25. A local organic farming group creates a common brand name for its products and signs up other farmers in the area to produce for the label.

- _____ 26. Three local retail co-operatives decide to amalgamate, centralizing operations at one grocery store, one hardware store, and one fuel depot.
- _____ 27. Three local school boards decide to amalgamate.
- _____ 28. Local families start a childcare network for in-home care of each other's children.
- _____ 29. A multinational corporation announces a new plant will be located in the area.
- _____ 30. Local businesses, bed-and-breakfast operators, artists, and naturalists form a coalition to promote tourism.

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