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Approaching Rural and Small-Town Communities

A struggle is taking place in the minds of Canadians over the image of rural and small-town communities. On the one hand, our historical roots conjure up images of a fiercely independent rural culture, carving out a nation from the rugged and plentiful resources that formed and continue to play a large role in our national economy and society. On the other hand, more recent political and economic changes, which coincide with the urbanization of the Canadian population, shift common perceptions of rural areas from being independent to being dependent on provincial and federal governments for their survival. The perceptual dichotomy of rural areas prompts the following questions: are rural and small-town communities the backbone of the Canadian economy, supplying the resources that drive urban and new economy growth? Or are our rural areas being propped up by the wealth generated in urban areas?

The debate over the viability of rural areas in British Columbia and across Canada is due, in part, to the fact that for the past quarter-century, rural communities and regions across Canada have struggled to cope with powerful forces of change. Changes in the economy have radically altered the relationship between corporations and communities. Governments, driven by budgetary restrictions and ideological commitments, have attempted to reduce their responsibilities to manage and to maintain the condition and parity of rural areas. Finally, resource scarcity and changes in our understanding of both ecological functioning and biodiversity have challenged traditional environmental standards and the exploitative practices of past economic activity. These forces have dramatically shaken conventional understandings of the social and economic nature of rural and small-town areas.

The debate between the *independence* and *dependence* of rural areas is also, to some extent, a false generalization. Change and variability in rural areas betray convenient interpretations of a homogeneous “rural” portrayed in

the media and in political and policy representations. Nevertheless, our interest as Canadians in the future of rural areas is clear, whether that interest is stimulated by discussions of land use and resource scarcity, tax dollar distribution, corporate restructuring, population losses or gains, heritage, or the resolution of long-standing Aboriginal claims to title and treaty.

This book offers a different perspective on the state of rural debate. We outline certain economic dependencies in rural communities and regions, but we are primarily interested in exploring what rural and small-town communities are doing, and can do, to diversify their local economies and become more viable and more resilient to change. We will characterize these locally based development efforts as community economic development (CED).

In the absence of traditional sources of economic and social certainty in rural areas, communities and governments at all levels are increasingly turning to CED to make a contribution to the economy and to the society of hinterland areas (Bryant and Joseph 2001). As will become clear over the course of this book, numerous challenges confront locally based approaches to development. Nevertheless, communities across British Columbia (and Canada) continue to forge ahead with their own economic development visions and plans, gradually and subtly altering the rural economic landscape and becoming themselves another force of change.

In this volume, we explore these issues in the context of four forest-based communities in British Columbia. Like many other jurisdictions, these communities are seeking ways to cope with change and hopefully to thrive, despite economic downturns, restructuring in the forest and other resource sectors, forest fires, international disputes over tariffs on softwood lumber, and a host of other issues that are beyond their control.

A three-year participatory research project, the Forest Communities project, facilitated our relationship as university researchers with the four case communities. We designed the project to explore the ways in which rural and small-town communities may use a CED approach to increase economic opportunities at the local level. This volume recounts our project experience and seeks to answer critical questions relevant to other communities surrounding the use of and prospects for CED.

“CED” is a term used to describe a participatory, bottom-up approach to development. The definition of CED that we used to guide the project was as follows: “CED is a process by which communities can initiate and generate their own solutions to their common economic problems and thereby build long-term community capacity and foster the integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives” (Ross and McRobie 1989). As such, CED is an approach for generating economic opportunity and addressing social and ecological issues at the local level. CED is gaining increasing attention from governments and development practitioners, and in academic

circles, to describe locally based development and to generate locally appropriate economic development strategies. As we will see throughout this book, CED was a particularly useful approach for facilitating both development action and our research objectives.

Purpose

Despite the practical affiliations and origins of CED, the purpose of this volume is to reflect on our project experiences and to view the conditions and changes taking place at the community level from a broader perspective. Specifically, we are interested in how our project experience is able to provide insight into the apparent conflict between the economic imperative and fluidity of capital versus the lived worlds of rural and small-town places. This conflict is responsible for much of the uncertainty that rural and small-town areas face on a daily basis. The mediation of this conflict will ultimately determine the relative success or failure of the development prospects for rural and small-town communities. More specifically still, we investigate the capacity of CED to be a contributing force to the successful transformation and/or continued prosperity of rural areas. We ask whether CED is capable of fostering local initiatives that will help create a more sustainable economic future for rural and small-town communities. Or will CED exist on the margins of economic development – a localized and palliative strategy for the spatially, economically, and socially marginalized? Answers to these questions are important if we are to move forward in finding meaningful solutions, economically and politically, to the intractability of uneven development.

Objectives

Our inquiry into CED is driven by two overall objectives: (1) to provide theoretical substance to an investigation of CED, and (2) to provide a systematic case study of CED linking inquiry, practice, and policy making. These two objectives are drawn from a realization that despite a strong record of localist or community-based research in Canada, understanding of the local, or CED, process is relatively limited. This is particularly true in terms of the mediating functions of local development processes and structures relative to economic change in an emerging global/local context. In general, local development, and CED as a form of local development, is often characterized as an “unruly” or random process that suffers from the lack of a more systematic approach. In addition, the contextual diversity (the real-world “messiness”) that defines the use of CED, and the limited amount of relevant systematic inquiry into CED, leads some to conclude that our present conceptualizations of local development also lack theoretical sophistication (Nutter and McKnight 1994; Filion 1998; Savoie 2000; Hayter 2000): “Forest towns have varied in their commitment to, and organization of,

local diversification. In this context, unruly implies a broad definition of entrepreneurialism, connoting a patchwork of bottom-up, entrepreneurial developments, only loosely coordinated, if at all, by broader planning frameworks” (Hayter 2000, 319).

The combination of the practical and conceptual limitations of our understandings of CED ultimately hinders the advancement of CED as a coherent policy response to economic change. Despite the conceptual growing pains of CED, however, increasing evidence suggests that communities and regions across Canada are actively engaging in self-directed development efforts that seek to diversify and strengthen their communities and local economies.

CED is action-oriented, but from a research and policy perspective, there are a variety of advantages to enhancing the theoretical relevance of CED. First, a better understanding of theory will enhance the relevance of a CED research agenda. Theoretical foundations provide CED researchers with the opportunity to build knowledge in a more systematic fashion. Theory provides common conceptual frameworks and common terms that will help to avoid repetition and researcher isolation.

Second, theoretical rigour improves practice. The opportunity to reflect on the dynamics of local development practice, to extrapolate “best practices,” and to narrow our understanding of the relationships between different contextual circumstances and local development implementation will provide practitioners with useful information and examples.

Finally, better theorization will lead to better policy. Theory necessarily facilitates generalizations drawn from experience. Over time, an increasing amount of research may lead to a sense of predictability and certainty regarding CED processes. Greater certainty is a necessary ingredient in the policy process, enabling policy makers to embrace a community-based approach to development and to construct appropriate standards for local accountability.

Themes

Three broad themes provide a conceptual foundation for our objectives. First, we use the concept of *dependency* to highlight the economic development lineage and, to a certain extent, the present condition of rural, resource-based communities. Dependency adequately captures the critical features and relationships between resource-based communities, governments, and corporations. We use dependency to uncover the roots of the changes rural communities are currently facing and to help to explain why change is so difficult for many communities and regions in the rural, resource-dependent environment.

Second, we employ the term *transition* to describe the changing social, economic, and environmental circumstances, at all levels, that are clearly evident across the rural landscape. Identifying the characteristics of change is again critical to understanding the challenges and opportunities that com-

munities face in pursuing more sustainable economic futures. Finally, as British Columbia adapts to new economic realities, the *resilience* of communities is important in terms of their ability to adapt, generate information, organize, and implement meaningful action.

Literature Comparisons and Contributions

A number of existing texts help to frame the specific contributions of this volume relative to our understanding of economic development and change in the rural environment. Pierce and Dale (1999) provide an overview of the state of community development and sustainability across Canada. Hayter (2000) provides an industrial and political perspective on the restructuring of the forest industry in BC. Cashore et al. (2001) concentrate on the policy process associated with the “search for sustainability” in BC forests. Each of these books, among others, makes an excellent contribution to building an understanding of the economic, political, and environmental changes currently influencing communities in BC and across Canada.

Our volume seeks to build on the above works by contributing and refining a *local development* perspective to our understanding of rural development issues, expressed here as community economic development (CED). Here again, though, we are building on the works of other researchers in Canada who have been steadily documenting and refining our understanding of the role and practices of CED (Coffey and Polese 1985; Bryant and Preston 1989; Barnes and Hayter 1994; Douglas 1994; Savoie 2000; Roseland 1998; Lloyd 1996). The Forest Communities project gained valuable insights from this literature, and this text seeks to address and advance many of the concerns and observations expressed by previous authors.

We must also mention the broader contributions of geography to our understanding of local development. Geography is well suited to inquiry into matters of local development. As Barnes and Hayter state (1997, 198): “Community development is highly sensitive to where a place is located (its situation), and the resources found there (its site).” Geographic inquiry contributes two distinctive ideas to this work. First, recent geographic research has paid particular attention to the role of the local and the importance of context in the development process. As a result, Massey (1995) states that we need a better understanding of local and global relations. In furthering her point, Massey provides five reasons to calm fears that a focus on local research will cause geography to drift into idiographic obscurity (1995, 324):

- The world is endlessly unique.
- An understanding of difference depends upon an understanding of broader structures.
- The comprehension of difference is one of the *raison d’être* of the human sciences.

- Intervening in the world requires an appreciation of its differences.
- It is the understanding of how the local and the global interact that is the next challenge.

Recent Canadian geographic research has responded to the challenge, broadly speaking, of greater inquiry into local development. First, of particular interest to this work are those studies that focus on rural and resource-based communities. These works have substantially contributed to the origins and design of this volume. For example, Barnes and Hayter (1994) provide an analysis of the impacts of the restructuring process in the BC forest products industry upon resource communities. Gill and Reed (1997) explore the role and impact of local and extra-local coalitions in bringing about policies and land-use decisions in a post-productivist landscape. Reed (1995a, 1995b) explores the role of local and national governments in promoting sustainable development. Clapp (1999) welcomes the role of local agency in resource management, advocating that industrialization be scaled back in favour of ecological, social, and cultural sustainability. Finally, Barnes et al. (2000) underscore the importance of local geographies and histories to the study of Canadian economic geography.

Second, the rural geographic literature has played an important role in outlining and guiding the inquiry for this work. Randall and Ironside (1996) highlight the continued importance of rural resource-based communities in defining Canada's global economic role. Their research is also important in challenging stereotypical perceptions of resource-based communities and revealing a greater degree of social and economic diversity, which will be critical to local development processes and to the continued survival and prosperity of rural communities. Troughton (1995) identifies a need to explore rural maintenance through models of sustainable rural development. He states that a *laissez-faire* political economic approach has left communities vulnerable to technological and economic changes. He contends that it is a priority for rural geography to redefine the entire rural system by focusing on the integration of its parts from the bottom up: "Rural geography is eminently suited to engage in a community-based approach" (Troughton 1995, 302). Pierce (1998) echoes Troughton's concerns, stating that the true diversity of rural environments has not received adequate attention in rural geography. Pierce specifically calls for more attention to locality and sustainable rural development in terms of improving our understanding of policies for sustainability and scale sensitivity.

In general, as Massey envisaged, there has been an increasing focus on the role of the local relative to global economic and state restructuring. Processes of development and the formation and mediation of uneven development become much more dynamic and contextually complex in a scale-flux environment. Hayter appropriately captures the situation from

the local perspective (2000, 392): “The wider global ‘space’ economy offers opportunities and threats to ‘places,’ with the result that the place-space relation is dynamic and subject to tension ... The ability of local populations to cope with these processes is highly varied and defines the substance and meaning of local models.” This volume seeks to explore and enhance our understanding of these “local models.”

Research Design

As stated earlier, the overall purpose of the Forest Communities project was to work with forest-based communities in BC to identify strategies and tools for strengthening local economic capacity. Forest Renewal BC (FRBC), a now defunct provincial Crown corporation, sponsored the research. The mandate of FRBC was to improve the well-being of BC’s forests, forest industry, and forest communities through the reinvestment of funds drawn from fees and royalties charged to forest companies for the right to harvest timber on Crown lands. The Forest Communities project qualified for funding due to the extent to which communities require diversification and stabilization strategies as a response to dealing with economic downturns and broader forces of restructuring in the province’s forest industry.

To guide the project, the Community Economic Development Centre (now the Centre for Sustainable Community Development) at Simon Fraser University outlined five overall research questions in advance:

- How can forest-based communities become more self-reliant?
- How can communities assess their current capacity to develop CED initiatives?
- What do communities need to know about themselves and about various potential CED initiatives to proceed with confidence?
- How can communities increase that capacity?
- How can one community’s experience with CED be usefully shared with other communities?

The selection of communities for the project was extremely important given its scope and participatory intent. We identified four communities through a multi-stage process. First, the CED Centre listed a call for “expressions of interest” through e-mail discussion lists (listservs). Researchers from the centre also made a number of personal inquiries to ensure that specific communities or regions not represented on the listserv were made aware of the project. Second, a number of communities responded to the initial scan and provided the centre with letters of support for the funding proposal. Third, upon receipt of the funding, the research team at the CED Centre conducted a brief survey questionnaire with interested communities. The survey gathered the following information:

- diversity of the local economy and the level of forest dependency
- history of development and planning initiatives
- extent of public involvement in these initiatives
- demonstrated interest in the research and willingness to commit resources to the project

The survey helped to determine the conditions of the responding communities (for example, level of forest dependency, planning and CED experience, and socio-economic conditions) and whether they would be likely to benefit from and fully participate in the research project. All communities had to exhibit a moderate degree of forest dependency and a willingness to contribute meaningfully to the project. The research team was also interested in working with a variety of circumstances in terms of economic diversity and levels of CED capacity. Finally, the research team expressed an interest in working with four specific communities, and each community invited us to meet with them to develop appropriate terms of reference. Research assistants organized a workshop in each community to devise a research workplan and to determine the specific development objectives for each community through a participatory process.

The above discussion briefly outlines the delicate balancing act required between funding institutions, researchers, and communities when seeking to adopt a participatory research model. In its purest form, the form of participatory research adopted by the project, “action research,” demands that researchers and communities or organizations be drawn together on an equal footing to negotiate and determine project objectives pertaining to research and action. The Forest Communities project design deviates from the purity of the participatory model. Our funder required a detailed proposal before releasing funds, that is, the CED Centre could not engage with the communities in any significant detail before receiving funding, and so the main proposal design did not involve the project communities. In an attempt to preserve collaborative respect with its potential research partners, the CED Centre used the above techniques to meet the demands of the funding body for predetermined research objectives while also maintaining directional flexibility with the communities. The culmination of the selection process, being a community-based workshop in each community, enabled the Centre and its new community partners to learn from one another and to reorient the research and action process to fit more closely with community conditions and objectives (see Chapter 9 for more details on the community/university relationship).

Project Methods

The negotiation of research relationships and the underlying intentions of the research process are important factors when selecting research methods.

This section highlights the methods used to facilitate the participatory research process. In doing so, this chapter responds in part to Reason's (1994) observation that methodological descriptions of participatory research processes are lacking in the literature.

Participatory research is a collaborative process that links researchers with practitioners in the joint pursuit of better theory *and* practice. The reasons for selecting a participatory methodology for the project will be explained in greater detail later, but there are two main reasons for using participatory research: (1) participatory research and CED share many of the same principles and goals, including participation, collaboration, and self-reliance; and (2) the project communities were interested in the process because they were motivated to create change, and not simply be the passive recipients of yet another research or consultant report.

Participatory research provided us with the means through which we could achieve both research and practical objectives within the same project. Combining theory and practice offers many research advantages, but it also raises challenging questions about both the validity of research and the utility of practice.

We will outline our reflections on the research process in Chapter 9. In brief, however, the participatory research process united community working groups and the CED Centre research team at each major stage of the project, including:

- setting the research parameters and deciding the agenda
- collecting research data
- conducting analysis and drawing conclusions
- planning and implementing CED initiatives
- evaluating progress and responding to the results of such evaluations

Decisions about methods that we used and who was primarily responsible for implementing specific project details were the result of a negotiated process, and were dependent upon the skills, resources, and time available to either the community or the university research team. A negotiated research process and the division of project-related labour accurately describes the form of participation demonstrated in the project. Research partners were not "joined at the hip," collaborating on every nuance in the research and development process. Instead, project partners designed a research strategy that balanced efficiency with self-determination in order to meet both research and development (that is, action) objectives. Community workshops provided the research partners with an opportunity for collective reflection in assessing the progress and contributions of the project.

We relied upon a variety of methods to facilitate the negotiated participatory research process. First, as stated earlier, the research team at the CED

Centre and community-based working groups facilitated the university/community partnership. Second, the research design stipulated that we assign research assistants to each of the communities to act as resource people for the working groups and to serve as liaisons between the university-based research team and the communities. Third, in addition to the specific community-based research activities of the research assistants, the project workplan scheduled four main workshops in each community throughout the three-year project, to serve as benchmarks for evaluating activities and for planning future activities. Fourth, the research team hired interns during the summers to work directly with the project communities. Both local residents and nonlocal undergraduate students from the CED Centre held intern positions. The research team and each community-based working group jointly determined internship job descriptions. Finally, the project relied upon a variety of data sources to inform research findings and to guide development decisions, including:

- community profiles
- surveys
- document analysis
- community workshops
- participant observation

Table 1.1 summarizes the relationship between the main data sources and the important themes identified for project reporting.

The participatory research relationship between the research team and the working groups offered a number of benefits to the project. First, the participatory research process facilitated a division of labour between mutually agreed upon tasks. Each community had experienced unsatisfactory external research and consulting relationships in the past. Consequently, the communities did not immediately grasp the action research process.

Table 1.1

Data matrix showing the relationship between the main data sources and the important themes identified for project reporting

Project component	Data source			
	Community profiles	Surveys	Community workshops	Participant observation
CED process			×	×
Capacity assessment	×	×	×	×
Capacity building	×	×	×	×
CED strategies	×	×	×	×

The project required several months of relationship building before there was a clear understanding that the university research team was not simply a quasi-consulting resource, solely intent on delivering a research report. For example, one community's inability to assign tangible resources to the project prevented any significant project development at the community level for the entire first year of the project.

Second, creating an organizational structure at the community level (working groups) created the necessary community-based resources to conduct the project. Finally, we designed the project to enhance, rather than to duplicate, previous or ongoing development processes and initiatives. The negotiated participatory research relationship ensured that the project did not supersede or duplicate existing group activities.

Defining "Rural"

Throughout this chapter and in the rest of the text, we employ the term "rural" to describe the case communities. We use this term for two reasons. First, residents in the case communities define their communities as "rural," and speak of a desire to maintain their "rural" quality of life while also pursuing new economic opportunities. Second, despite the many technical definitions of rural, the term "degrees of rurality" is perhaps the most useful concept for consolidating the differences in rural definitions *and* the similar socio-economic characteristics that may be attributed to rural areas (Du Plessis et al. 2002). We are aware of and sensitive to technical rural differences, but, particularly in the "heartland"/"hinterland" dichotomy of British Columbia, we use the term "rural" in more general non-metropolitan terms. We will continue a discussion of the meaning of "rural" and the status of rural areas in BC and Canada in Chapter 2.

Organization

In order to investigate the three themes outlined earlier – dependency, transition, and resilience – this book is divided into nine remaining chapters. In Chapter 2 we provide an overview of the BC provincial economy and profiles of the four project communities. The chapter will provide readers with an opportunity to understand the broader provincial and specific community conditions under which the project operated. The relatively poor performance of the BC economy, combined with community-based concerns regarding the extent of forest and public sector dependency, created conditions in which the project communities were looking for new ideas and approaches to facilitating economic development.

Chapter 3 introduces the first part of the conceptual framework used to guide the analysis of research findings: dependency. The concept of dependency is drawn from the legacy of staples development in BC and across Canada described by staples theory. Staples theory describes Canadian

economic development in terms of the successive exploitation of resources (Innis 1933; Watkins 1981, 1982). We use staples theory for its seminal contribution to understanding the unique character of economic development in Canada and for revealing the historical conditions that contribute to the traditional social and economic dependency of resource-based communities. Staples theory is also relevant to the project research because of its ability to describe dimensions of the current condition of Canadian economic development (Barnes 1996; Britton 1996; Hutton 1994). The legacy of staples development and the marginalization of First Nations communities will provide a contextually based account of the origins of community dependency and help to explain some of the many challenges associated with implementing CED.

Chapter 4 introduces the second component of our conceptual framework: transition. Specifically, this chapter outlines the process and impacts of economic restructuring in BC. We discuss restructuring in the forest sector specifically from a local development perspective. In addition to describing change in the forest sector, we briefly review other forces of social and economic change in BC, including the environmental movement, First Nations activism, economic diversification, government policy, and community action.

In Chapter 5, we introduce the final part of our conceptual framework: resilience. This chapter provides a more detailed discussion of the origins and meaning of CED. We associate the origins of CED with the lessons learned from and frustrations associated with market failure and other approaches to local and regional development. This experience-based description of CED builds a case for the use of CED beyond promoting matters of social equity and environmental justice. The CED approach is soundly based upon lessons learned in the past about how to promote successful local (and sustainable) development.

In Chapter 6, we present findings drawn from an extensive literature review that identifies important success factors associated with community and regional development around the world. The chapter presents a “success factor framework” that we used to assess the conditions and capacity of the case communities for engaging in CED planning. Community practitioners and researchers may use the assessment process and the community indicators attached to the framework to identify strategic opportunities and monitor the CED process at the local level. This chapter contributes to an ongoing dialogue within BC and across Canada concerning best practices for community-based development and the challenges associated with how to measure the impacts of various CED activities.

Chapter 7 reviews the components of strategic planning that we used to facilitate the CED process in the project communities. This chapter builds

on the success factor framework presented in Chapter 6 to outline the specifics of the CED process; in other words, how do you implement CED? The chapter reviews lessons drawn from the project on how to prepare for CED planning, how to manage the CED planning process once it is operating, and how to sustain the CED process beyond an initial start-up phase.

Chapter 8 provides a systematic review of various CED strategies used by the case communities in an effort to diversify their local economies – the story of development. We divide our observations of the various CED strategies into the following sections: business development; arts, culture, and heritage development; community resource management; tourism promotion and development; and networks and community relations. This chapter illustrates the great diversity of CED strategies available to communities and discusses different challenges and opportunities associated with a shift in development focus from external to internal.

In Chapter 9, we reflect on the utility and challenges of the participatory research process. Participatory research is an effective tool for navigating between the dual objectives of research and action in the project. However, the figurative and literal distance between the university and the communities presents numerous opportunities to discuss the dynamics of the research process. As universities seek to enhance their overall relevance to society, participatory research (which offers an opportunity to maintain the integrity of the research process while also delivering tangible benefits to community research partners) will be an increasingly valuable, although controversial, tool for constructing university/community relationships.

Finally, Chapter 10 provides a synthesis of major findings. The chapter outlines lessons and challenges facing practitioners, researchers, and policy makers concerning the viability and resilience of forest communities. The chapter discusses specific challenges associated with enhancing the scope and scale of CED activity, and highlights elements of a continuing research agenda to enhance our understanding of the potential and limitations of CED. The chapter ends with a discussion of a theoretically and practically based “community charter,” consisting of a series of guiding principles, for increasing the leverage and capacity of CED in forest-based and rural, non-metropolitan communities and regions. We hope that this community charter will contribute to the revitalization, or second growth, of resource communities in the coming years.

Throughout the book, we have included specific “community voice” contributions. A number of community-based individuals associated with the project provide written contributions with an insider look at the workings and dynamics of CED in their communities. These individuals represent a cross-section of different community development organizations, local governments, and working group members from each community.

Conclusion

When so many important factors in community life depend on decisions made by senior governments and large, distant corporations, the notion of seeking more local control over the economy may appear to be unrealistic. We acknowledge that the challenges communities face are significant, and that even with increased diversification and flexibility, a prosperous and sustainable future for many communities may continue to be elusive. However, we are motivated to look for local or community solutions due to a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that deliberate community action can and does influence the local economy and is capable of improving the quality of life for local residents. While the prospects for CED are constrained and impacted by many external factors, the choices communities make on their own can be important in determining their future.

As the following chapters will illustrate, local initiative has always played an important role in the development of rural communities across Canada. However, the present pace and dynamic nature of change creates both immense challenges and great opportunities for locally based development to play an even more *structurally* significant role in the economic health and sustainability of rural communities. This book seeks to increase our level of understanding about how CED can be implemented effectively and how CED efforts fit within the context of other forces of change across the political, economic, environmental, and social landscape.