

STRENGTHENING  
RURAL  
CANADA



RENFORCER LES  
COMMUNAUTÉS  
RURALES DU CANADA

# STRENGTHENING RURAL CANADA

Why Place Matters in Rural Communities

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Six communities in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Ontario created literacy and essential skills plans using a place-based approach. These communities hired coordinating people and agreed to participate in discussions about their community for 10 months. We are grateful to the people of Gold River and Salmo in BC, Rosetown and Hudson Bay in Saskatchewan, and Hearst and Kapuskasing in Ontario.

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## INTRODUCTION

Images of life in rural Canada are most frequently about wide-open spaces, fresh air and water, wildlife and a certain kind of autonomy, freedom and rigour.

While many parts of these images are true, new pressures are defining and reshaping rural life. Across Canada, there is a slow crisis occurring in many of our rural and small town communities; the struggle to sustain themselves is a major cause for concern. Aside from the occasional news story about a forest fire, a mine opening or a mill closing, many of the most pressing rural challenges are often overlooked and not getting the attention they deserve.

Aging populations, the migration of youth to urban areas and shifting economies are just some of the many issues facing rural communities. While this trend has been building for decades, we are reaching a tipping point where shrinking tax bases, aging infrastructure and diminishing populations are creating a situation where some rural communities cannot sustain basic levels of services and facilities that are needed to attract and retain residents and business. Sustainable populations and a strong local economy go hand in hand. Businesses and local services cannot be supported without residents, and residents cannot be retained or attracted without businesses and local services. Once a community's assets are below a certain point, it is very difficult to reverse.

It is important that we work towards developing strategies and solutions so that rural communities can thrive and contribute to the economic and cultural fabric of our nation.

This report documents phase two of a research project about developing literacy and essential skills (LES) as part of the solution to supporting growth and sustainability for rural communities. The project takes a place-based approach and engages six rural communities in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Ontario.

The main objective of the research project was to clearly articulate and define a place-based framework that will allow rural, small town and remote communities in three provinces to identify adult learning and literacy objectives and build sustainable and replicable place-based strategic plans suitable to their unique needs and capacities.

The expected outcomes of the project were to:

- Increase capacity of six rural communities to assess their needs in order to develop their own sustainable LES strategies and solutions
- Increase awareness of the benefits of raising LES levels, thereby lowering unemployment rates and alleviating local skills shortages in rural communities
- Increase understanding of the effectiveness of using place-based approaches in small, rural and remote communities

Literacy and essential skills are “joined up” to many aspects of the lives of individuals and communities. In fact, literacy is connected to health, having enough to eat, employment, family well-being, further education, and justice. To support LES effectively, we need to place it in the context of community and connect it with real life issues and events. To resolve complex community issues, we need to think about what role skill development plays. To act on these “joined up” issues, we need to connect community agencies, organizations, and institutions that focus on them, providing a place and opportunity to pool resources as well as to experience and view things through a LES lens.

The six rural communities involved in the research project were Gold River and Salmo in British Columbia, Rosetown and Hudson Bay in Saskatchewan and Hearst and Kapuskasing in Ontario. Hearst and Kapuskasing are primarily francophone communities.

People in each community took time to talk about the important assets and challenges of their community. Between September, 2015 and July, 2016, they were invited to make a plan about developing literacy skills, knowledge and experience particularly related to addressing their unique challenges. A task group and facilitator was identified in each community. All interested community members, businesses, local government, and community agencies were invited to participate in the discussion individually, in small groups, at community forums and online.

No one knows their community better than the people who live there. These people must decide how they will live together in that community, and how they will make a place for themselves to be. As participants at one community meeting recognized, we often talk in terms of “they” should do something about this issue. Who are “they”? Actually, for many things, that’s “us”; what are we going to do about this issue?

Though this report mainly looks at the experience of literacy and essential skills planning in the six research communities, it also references the extensive experience of community planning for LES development that has been taking place across British Columbia since 2004. In addition, it references the extensive community planning that has taken place in the last two years in the urban community of Victoria.

## WHAT IS RURAL?

While it is often easy for us to conjure up images of rural Canada, defining what actually constitutes a rural *community* is more challenging. A common response from many people is that we intuitively know what a rural community is when we are in one. Yet, the word “rural” may not be the one that people use to describe their communities. People who come from rural Canada may say that they come from small towns or that they are northerners. The local understanding of “rural” may not just depend on the particular combination of distance and density, but on the relative comparison to other communities (Reimer & Bollman, 2009). In some provinces all communities that are not within the southernmost large centres of the province are considered rural, no matter what size they are. For example, in British Columbia, Prince George, which has a population of over 70,000, is considered rural by many because it is outside of the Lower Mainland.

Furthermore, what elements contribute to a definition of rural are highly debated and contested among academics and policy analysts. Definitions of rural are often selected or augmented based on the context in which they are used (du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman & Clemenson, 2002). For many, the term ‘rural’ is a social construction that reflects local understandings, history, lifestyle and institutions; for others, mainly analysts, rural is simply considered to be a reflection of distance and density (Reimer & Bollman, 2009). While the term rural can have different meanings to different people, there is a general understanding that rural areas are places that have smaller populations, are distant from urban areas and have distinct identities and cultural ties.

The rural communities in the research planning project were chosen because they are small, are some distance from major centres, and reflect the diverse nature of rural Canada.

Gold River is located at the heart of Vancouver Island in British Columbia and has a population of about 1,265. Tucked between the Gold and Heber Rivers, the community is the gateway to the historic Nootka

Sound. Its beautiful and rugged terrain makes the area popular with hikers, fishermen, whale watchers and kayakers. The largest nearby community is Campbell River, which is a drive of approximately an hour and a half away.

Salmo is surrounded by the Selkirk Mountains in British Columbia's West Kootenay Region. Its population is approximately 1,140. Located at the junction of the Crowsnest Highway and Highway 6 near the United States border, it is about a half an hour away from each of the towns of Trail, Castlegar and Nelson. Originally known as Salmon Siding (named for the river where salmon spawned before the Columbia River was dammed), the village was founded as a small mining town during the gold rush of 1896.

Rosetown is located in West Central Saskatchewan, with a population of approximately 2,315. Its location provides an opportunity to serve a large surrounding agricultural area. It is located at the juncture of major highways going north/south and east/west. The large city of Saskatoon is an hour and 15 minutes away; North Battleford is an hour and a half.

Hudson Bay, approximate population 1,500, is located in Saskatchewan's northeast Red Deer Valley near the Manitoba border. The town was originally part of a fur trading post district. The area grew from the presence of the Canadian Northern Railway Company and was established as the Hudson Bay Junction village in 1909, growing to a full-fledged town in 1947. Hudson Bay is about an hour and a half drive from the nearest larger community of Tisdale.

Located in Central Northern Ontario is the small town of Hearst, approximate population 5,090, with a unique blend of rich cultural French, Oji-Cree and Euro-Canadian heritage. Developed with the construction of the National Transcontinental Railway in 1913, Hearst was officially incorporated in 1922, with many of the town's settlers originating from Quebec. Thus Hearst is proud to be a primarily French-speaking community, an exceptional case particularly since it contains all the infrastructure of a hospital, college, university, and recreation centre.

Also located in Central Northern Ontario in the Grey Clay Belt, is the bilingual community of Kapuskasing, approximate population of 8,200. Formerly known as MacPherson, Kapuskasing began alongside the development of the National Transcontinental Railway. Hearst and Kapuskasing are about an hour and a quarter drive away from each other and Kapuskasing is about two hours from the larger city of Timmins.

## WHY IS RURAL IMPORTANT?

People might ask "why don't we just let market forces do their work and allow communities to gradually fade away and let more prosperous ones grow?" If rural communities are just going to perish, why delay the inevitable?

As a nation we will all be worse off – rural and urban alike – if we cannot secure a sustainable future for all communities. In "Rural and Urban: Differences and Common Ground," Bill Reimer (2004) writes that rural and urban Canada is inextricably linked. Rural places provide timber, food, minerals, and energy that serve as bases of urban growth. Polèse and Shearmur (2002) contend that rural Canada will continue to exist and matter to Canadians because natural resources will continue to be exploited, and those resources will need a local presence to maintain and care for them. As well, a demand for tourism and recreational activities will always be a part of rural Canada. Rural places process urban pollution, refresh and restore urban populations, and maintain the heritage upon which much of Canada depends (Reimer,

2004, p. 71). Rural and small town communities across Canada play an essential role in creating and defining our social, economic and cultural identity.

In their extensive review of peripheral areas, Polèse and Shearmur (2002) concluded that peripheral regions may not decrease in Canada. They state that:

What we know is that populations will in all likelihood decline in the majority of peripheral regions, the predictable result of the combined impacts of the demographic transition and expected future trends in employment. In some cases, the decline will be dramatic, especially for communities whose livelihood is entirely based on a single threatened resource. However, except for such extreme cases, we do not know where this process will end or when and at what population and employment levels peripheral communities will eventually find a new equilibrium (p. 186).

The research LES planning communities are all founded on resource-based industries such as mining, agriculture and forestry. Some maintain a dependence on those resources. Others are figuring out how to reinvent themselves because resource industries have closed.

Gold River was originally developed as a pulp and paper industry community. However, the pulp mill closed its doors in 1998, and even though forestry and logging companies have also employed many people, work is unsteady and periodically ceases. There is a fish farm and a deep sea port in the area. There is the potential for mining. Gold River is the home of the MV Uchuck III, a coastal freighter in Canada that regularly takes supplies and people along the rugged coastline to Yuquot, or Friendly Cove – a National Historic Site on Nootka Island where Captain Cook first landed. The village is surrounded by beautiful hiking trails, provincial parks, limestone caves, ski hills and camp grounds that make it an ideal spot for nature lovers who prefer to stray from large crowds.

Salmo is rich in mining and logging history. Though mining exploration continues, there are no working mines in the area now. Salmo offers numerous outdoor activities including fishing, hiking, golfing and skiing.

Historically an agriculture and farming community, Rosetown has maintained its roots and continues to thrive in this industry. The town acts as a transportation and logistics hub, since it is at a crossroad between Saskatoon, North Battleford and Swift Current.

With the vast forests around Hudson Bay, mills and related forestry industry services have been the most prominent employers and contributors to the local economy since the early 1960s. However, in just over a decade, the area has transitioned from three fully operational mills to just one. Hudson Bay Regional Park, located two kilometres south of the town, attracts tourists with its access to natural habitats, snowmobile trails, birding, fishing, and big game hunting. Hudson Bay is known as the “Moose Capital of the World.”

Located in the boreal forest, Hearst (known as the Moose Capital of Canada) offers an abundance of outdoor activities all year around – from canoeing and kayaking in the summer, to snowmobiling on more than 1,000 km of marked trails in the winter. Forestry is the town’s current primary industry, with mill and tree planting work available throughout the area. Economic developers are looking for other opportunities to help build up the community again with the potential for a graphite mine in the next few years. Projects such as rehabilitating the local airport and developing the tourism industry have also been discussed.

The abundance of black spruce around Kapuskasing led to the opening of Spruce Falls Power and Paper Company Ltd in 1920 when many townspeople gradually began to abandon farming to work at the mill or in logging camps. Kapuskasing offers many activities for outdoor enthusiasts, such as fishing, skiing and canoeing. Currently, Kapuskasing's economic development team is trying to expand on its existing resources while integrating into different sectors like solar energy, tourism, and mining.

Sometimes, isolated communities are able to start successful enterprises such as the La Maison Verte in Hearst. This social economic enterprise grows small trees for replanting and vegetables for selling in the summer. The business began as an organization that employed single mothers and vulnerable women. It now provides opportunities for all people to re-enter the workforce.

Another example from Hearst is the family-owned Villeneuve Construction Co., established in 1971, that has grown from a single small-wheel backhoe operation to a full fleet of modernized equipment and facilities that operates throughout Northern Ontario.

## **RURAL DECLINE AND REGIONALIZATION**

There are costs associated with rural decline. For example, there are the costs of subsidization and supporting services with fewer users and lower tax bases. When closing single resource towns, there are well-documented costs associated with shutting down institutions, conducting environmental assessments, severance packages for municipal employees, and resettlement costs for residents (Intergovernmental Committee on Urban and Regional Research, 2005). In rural communities with limited employment opportunities, it is often extremely difficult for residents to relocate. They may not be able to sell their homes, be able to afford to rent or buy elsewhere, pay for moving costs, be able to find work or have the prerequisites to take training elsewhere.

When the pulp mill closed in Gold River several years ago, many families had to move away, small businesses closed, and service providers no longer had the numbers of people to continue; eventually even the bank closed its doors. The closures meant that people had to travel an hour or more to Campbell River for key services and while there, they did much of their shopping. Consequently, even more businesses closed since people were not "buying locally." The issue of local buying has been raised in all the research communities. Small businesses like grocery stores can only afford to stock common items and generally have to charge more. People tend to buy the bulk of their purchases when they are away from the community for other reasons.

Amalgamation or regionalization of rural services is associated with rural decline. While closing services in small communities and focusing them in the largest community in a region may make sense from a public policy perspective, this is not usually an optimum solution for rural residents. It often means that local citizens have to travel some distance for services or can only access services by telephone or online. Regionalization represents a loss of autonomy for most small centres and presents challenges to the community's personal identities, which have been developed over many generations (Reimer, 2009).

A widespread example is the regionalization of Service Canada offices which has meant the closure or extreme downsizing of local offices. People are directed to information and forms online, but do not receive any assistance for finding that information or for filling out forms. This issue was raised during several of the LES planning discussions. Many people do not have the necessary computer skills or equipment to find or use online forms. As a result, libraries and literacy programs find themselves in the new position of assisting people with finding and filling out government forms.

A more localized example, though common across the country, is the closure of college campuses in smaller communities. This is the natural result of insufficient enrolment in specific programs. The college cannot afford to offer programs for very small groups of people. However, when a campus is closed students often have to drive for one or more hours to attend training or they have to rely on distance/online delivery. Travel in rural Canada in the winter is often gruelling or not possible for people without vehicles. Where the internet is unreliable and/or there is no personal assistance for finding courses and getting through the course materials, distance delivery is not effective.

## RURAL DEMOGRAPHICS AND THE HUMAN CAPITAL DILEMMA

### Population decline

Since the end of the First World War, the population in Canada and the United States has become predominantly urban; moving from the country to the city has become a constant feature of life for many rural people (Corbett, 2007). According to Corbett (2007), rural mobility continues to be crucial in the development of industrial capitalism. For rural youth, educational attainment has increasingly become more of a reason to move to urban centres.

The people in Rosetown noted that young people leaving is not a new trend. It has always been common for young people to long for new experiences and to want to get away from the small towns in which they were raised. As post-secondary education is increasingly important for good jobs, young people are encouraged to go away to school. The problem is that they do not often come back, possibly because there are few jobs in their hometowns particularly related to their fields of study.

A few communities noted that when young people start families they sometimes come back because the community is a safe place to raise children, there is support from extended family and/or the community is more affordable than most urban centres.

However, we are reaching a critical hollowing out point in many rural communities where each additional new birth cannot make up for the loss of so many young people leaving. According to Polèse and Shearmur (2002):

[M]any peripheral communities will enter a phase of sustained population decline; this is a break with the past. This is not simply the result of industrial location trends. New developments are impacting peripheral communities. These have to do with growing constraints on (natural) resource exploitation and the effects of a low birth rate/increasingly aging demographic. Most peripheral regions have historically been areas of net out-migration. Until recently, the effects of out-migration on population were hidden because of the countervailing effects of births. This is no longer the case. Low birth rates mean that net out-migration will now automatically trigger population decline. Migration has become a critical variable (p. xxii).

When families decide to live in a rural community because it is more affordable or a good place to raise children, they are sometimes required to support themselves by one of the adults working away from the community. Usually, the father is away for two or more weeks at a time, flying into oil or mineral mining camps. This arrangement does not just have an impact on family dynamics, but also on the community, since

it reduces the pool of available volunteer time and expertise. The community profile has, in essence, a greater number of “single parent” families.

## Human Capital Dilemma

Human capital generally refers to the various dimensions of the human being that yield services or income over time. It corresponds to any stock of knowledge or characteristics the worker has that contributes to his or her productivity. According to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (2011), “[h]uman capital is defined as the knowledge, skills and abilities which allow the people working in a community to be productive. The human capital in a community is the collective wealth of experience of all people in the community” (p.13).

Compounding the challenges of population decline in rural Canada is the general understanding that the knowledge-based economy requires increased levels of skills and educational attainment. The forces of technological change, globalization and higher knowledge-based industries all work in tandem to create higher demands for higher levels of skills, knowledge and abilities. With increasing technology, traditional rural economic sectors such as mining, manufacturing, forestry and agriculture are making greater demands for more skilled and specialized workers (Bollman, 1998). Bollman (1998) contends that new jobs in the globalising economy require high human capital to mitigate for unpredicted changes; thus, improving local workforces are essential to provide opportunities for individuals regardless of where they work, be it rural or urban.

In communities that have traditionally relied on employment at one or more large resource-based companies that pay quite well, there is a common assumption that people will simply be employed in that industry. There was a time when people left school early specifically to work at the mill or mine; training or education were not required. People learned to do the work on the job. Employment in these same industries today generally require at least high school completion, but even so, the aspiration and tradition of going to work for the community company remains. There is little incentive to take more academic courses during high school than is required to graduate.

At least one community in the research project and several communities across British Columbia have identified this issue as not having a “culture of learning” in the community. Residents see a culture of learning as something that needs to be encouraged and intentionally developed.

While efforts to improve the educational attainment levels for many rural communities may seem like a useful goal, a potential dilemma can occur if there are no local jobs for those with higher education. Alasia and Magnusson (2005) contend that the restructuring taking place within the economy is resulting in the concentration of higher-skilled jobs in urban centres and lower-skilled jobs in rural areas. According to Reimer and Bollman (2009), there is less incentive for rural individuals to achieve higher levels of educational attainment if their effort will be wasted, and/or if individuals will face extra costs in moving to another community where they can employ their new skills. As seen many times when rural people leave their communities to gain higher levels of training or education, there is always the potential to lose skilled residents to other areas when there is minimal financial incentive to return to the community. On the other hand, if there is a lack of opportunities or perception of lack of opportunities, rural residents may leave anyway so that they gain higher levels of skills or educational attainment.

According to Reimer and Bollman (2009), training provided in community colleges is better aligned with the skills needs of rural employers. They suggest that rural development policy attention might be better

directed towards enhancing this pattern of developing local skills for local economies. The alignment of rural education and training policies and strategies to the skill needs of the local economy is important; if not aligned, post-secondary institutions are essentially training people to leave, or as Corbett has expressed, they are providing “learning to leave.”

It seems like there are many opportunities for communities to develop appropriate educational and skills development (human capital) strategies that align to local economic development opportunities in meaningful ways to encourage people to stay and entice new people to come. In practice, this development is more difficult. Aside from resource-based industries, most rural businesses are small, family-owned operations. All of the research communities identified the need to develop more businesses so that their communities could thrive. However, how to encourage business development and train people is more complex. Entrepreneurship is difficult and risky. Community discussions revolved around the possibility of mentoring, providing specific human resources and accounting training for small businesses, brainstorming about what kinds of businesses might be successful, and providing business training for high school students.

Sometimes there are circumstances that limit business potential that are beyond the control of the community. For example, in Gold River, the land that surrounds the community is owned by logging companies and the First Nation band. The people of the town have few options in terms of the use of the land and the timber that comes from it. Though there should be value-added wood product potential in the community, this arrangement is not possible. Other opportunities related to tourism development can be explored.

In a couple of BC communities, training for jobs was created in response to specific community needs where there was clear job potential. In one case, a new hospital was going to be built. Members of the community LES planning coalition realized that most of the labour for the building would need to be brought from outside. People in the community simply did not have the skills required. The coalition brought together school and college partners to offer a trades training program in the local high school. Students who had been attending school only sporadically became deeply engaged as they trained to be the skilled tradespeople that the community needed.

In another instance, the community planning partners realized that they did not have enough early childhood educators for the licensed daycares and preschools that they had. These planners pulled in the partners that they needed to offer the required training.

One of the research planning communities recognized that all of the non-profit organizations had a common need for board training. Instead of providing this individually, they decided that they could bring in training for their collective board members. Some of this training will be advantageous for business people as well -- particularly for human resources and financial management.

A long-standing theory exists among many economists that inexorably links human capital to positive outcomes at the individual, enterprise and government levels. Recent empirical studies of economic growth suggest that the skills and knowledge of a nation’s population are important in determining its economic performance (OECD, 2013). While the evidence between rural growth and human capital has been inconclusive in Canada, there have been rural studies in other countries that showed that more highly educated rural regions have higher employment growth than lower educated ones (Bollman, 1998). A study by McGranahan and Kassel (1997) for the OECD showed that for a select group of countries, higher educated rural regions showed higher employment growth than lower educated rural regions. As well,

research in the United States shows a positive correlation between local education levels and local employment growth (Killian & Beaulieu, 1995). As wealth and technology become increasingly mobile, Reich has recently found that the wealth of a locality is increasingly reliant on the human capacity of its residents (Reich, 1991). Similarly, Bollman (1998) suggests that rural economic development strategies should place greater emphasis on human capital development to stimulate local job growth.

As policy is increasingly being shifted from a top-down, institutionally-driven perspective, there is a greater understanding of the importance of linking businesses, people, services and knowledge at a local level to allow for more innovative, competitive and effective interventions. Reimer (2009) suggests that rural people understand that the form and degree of access to rural services may be different than in urban areas, such that there may be opportunities to create local innovative solutions to design and deliver human capital strategies that align with economic development in a place.

The research planning communities all recognized that LES development would not necessarily occur as a result of formalized programs. Much learning occurs informally and non-formally; for example, during the course of new life experiences, non-credit evening programs, while volunteering, and when learning new phone, video and television devices. The committees began to think of ways that learning could be integrated into the life of the community. To some extent, learning begins to happen more broadly simply because people become more aware of its importance and how it impacts life in the community.

## **Policy and Practice in Rural Development**

General policy discussions have often revolved around the distinction between people-based policy and place-based policy (Olfert & Partridge, 2010). People-based policies focus on the direct help of individuals or families regardless of the context they are in, and place-based policies generally refer to public expenditures or investments in places or regions that are lagging relative to the national reference point (Moore & Fry, 2011).

For many years, governments across Canada and in many other jurisdictions have pursued place-based policies to stimulate rural development. Traditionally, rural place-based policy has been associated with top-down sector/infrastructure investments, service subsidies (health care and education), and region-specific tax incentives or funds. Emergent policies, on the other hand, are generally more collaborative by nature. Over the years, rural place-based policy and practice has evolved in order to respond and adjust to changing rural socioeconomic realities (Goldenberg, 2008). According to Goldenberg (2008), there are several broad policy approaches and practices to support rural development. These approaches include:

- Traditional economic instruments: grants, contributions, loans to businesses, tax incentives and financial measures targeted at rural small businesses and enterprise development.
- Innovation investments in technology and regional clusters: investments in research and development, tax incentives to businesses and industries, commercialization and marketing of products and services, support for innovation clusters and investments in human capital.
- Community economic development: where policies and practices are driven by non-profits, in particular co-ops and community trusts, to encourage local economic development.
- Community development and capacity building: where policies and practices enhance the capacity of a community or region in order to identify issues, set goals, develop plans and initiate long term

strategies to take charge of their own development. These approaches and practises emphasize the importance of asset building designed to augment the resources and assets of communities and individuals to strengthen their ability to address their own needs.

An example of the last approach to rural development is the government sponsored development of regional education plans in three parts of BC – the northwest, northeast and Kootenays. People from various interested sectors within the regions were invited to identify the educational challenges and opportunities of the regions. This initiative was particularly initiated by the current interest in the oil and liquefied natural gas industry.

Emergent place-based policies and practices more frequently being used for rural development are often described as partnerships and/or new governance models (Goldenberg, 2008). These models are more open to unique regional and community differences, are collaborative in nature and cut across and blend many different practices and policy approaches. Emergent place-based policy/partnership models recognize the importance of authentic partnerships between governments, the private sector, communities, voluntary organizations, educational and other institutions (Goldenberg, 2008). In partnership models, the government essentially acts as the means, providing opportunity, resources and authority. The government partners with the community so the residents and stakeholders have a greater say and responsibility in local decisions. According to Goldenberg (2008):

The increasing importance being attached to place-based policies reflects growing recognition of the complexity and interrelated nature of modern social and economic issues and the need for effective community-based and community-driven strategies that are rooted in local knowledge, draw on and mobilize local resources and expertise, and are delivered through networked relationships and real partnerships (p. 7).

## **What are Place-Based Approaches?**

There are, of course, large variations between communities in terms of their local economies, industry composition, human capital, resources and assets (Froy & Giguère, 2010). These variations are often attributed to natural resources, historical developments and socioeconomic conditions (Froy & Giguère, 2010). As local economies, demographics, and cultures shift, their impacts on local places manifest in a variety of ways; this shift applies to all communities, rural and urban alike. Therefore, policy analysts, practitioners and residents are increasingly putting a higher value on the importance of “place” as the organizing principle and unit of analysis for social and economic change; place-based approaches are increasingly being seen as effective strategies for meeting the needs of individual communities (Bradford, 2008).

At their core, place-based approaches assume that the community matters and that the residents are the key to understanding and addressing their issues. These approaches are based on the understanding that people who live in the community truly know their problems and they are also the ones who are the key to the solutions.

Place-based approaches use collaborative means to address complex socioeconomic issues through interventions defined at a specific geographic scale. Place-based approaches are designed in a manner so that local stakeholders are engaged in a participatory process within a place – be it a neighborhood,

city, or region (Bellefontaine & Wisener, 2011). Put more simply, multiple stakeholders come together across sectors to address the issues that occur within a specific location.

While the focus, scope and intensity of place-based approaches vary, they most commonly result in new, locally-made strategies and interventions that use, modify and/or extend existing resources in order to better serve the particular needs of a given community. Place-based approaches take a holistic approach when considering issues (Acker & Rowen, 2013). The approaches allow people in a community to investigate how parts interrelate and how their issues have evolved over time within the context of the community. Community members gain a better understanding of interdependencies within systems and are better able to identify the leverage points to achieve desired changes. People can redefine their viewpoints and drive collaborations that are necessary to address local issues.

Generally, place-based approaches are quite amorphous; they can be constructed in a variety of ways and can be initiated by many different types of institutions. Place-based approaches can also be referred to as comprehensive community initiatives, community revitalization or change efforts and asset-based development.

## **Why Use Place-Based Approaches for Rural Communities?**

Rural Canada is comprised of a large number of heterogeneous small towns, villages and remote locations that are in many ways just as diverse, if not more, than Canada's urban centres (Reimer & Markey, 2008). There are a number of unique factors that differentiate and distinguish the diversity of rural communities. Distance, density, assets, social norms, populations, history and heritage are all different; these features shape and define the different identities and aspects that make up rural Canada (Reimer & Markey, 2008).

In the initial stages of the research planning project, community leads identified the issues that they thought community members would talk about. As many of the issues were the same – lack of small business, lack of volunteers, aging population – there was a feeling that all of the community plans would look the same. At the end of the project, participants were struck by the diversity of the solutions: they noted that: “we are the same in so many ways, but we are also so different.”

Given the level of diversity within rural Canada and due to myriad unique challenges and issues that face many rural communities across the country, there is no single silver bullet that will address all issues. While the contexts and challenges in rural communities can be very different, locally crafted strategies that align to the needs and capacity of rural communities may offer some promise. As each community has different conditions, assets, identities and forms of governance, addressing specific community issues will ultimately depend on the capacity of the community to mobilize resources and address its challenges.

According to Reimer and Markey (2008), “place” matters because assets, services, governance and identities all are formed, reinforced and occur in places. The Rural Research Centre (2004) contends that characteristics, needs, and capacities vary greatly in rural communities. This finding suggests that community-based solutions will be more successful because the effectiveness of local solutions ultimately depends on the capacity of a community, its resources and its collective efficacy. According to Reimer and Bollman (2009), when policies and actions are detached from places and the people that reside in them, they often undermine the formal and informal structures which local residents rely on.

There are also many concerns about the negative impacts of general policies and practices when they are not appropriately adapted to the specific dynamics of rural communities. Too often, top down policies are disconnected from the needs of rural communities and the human, physical, economic and development programs that are in place. When policies are not designed around the unique needs of specific communities, they are usually not reflective of the local assets, capacities and socioeconomic conditions which are critical aspects to take into consideration for community development. Furthermore, as most existing federal and provincial policy structures operate in bureaucratic silos and are individual or sector focused, they often fail to capture and address the important interconnected relationships that impact many rural communities. Successful policies, programs and actions in rural areas have to be particularly sensitive to the way in which the local economy, labour, service and networks are structured in different communities, as well as, the extra demands and/or unique factors that are specific to each community (Reimer & Markey, 2008). Place-based policies, approaches and practices can present viable alternatives; they can provide communities with greater levels of autonomy in the decisions that relate to their communities.

While many rural communities lack certain kinds of assets that are often located in larger towns and cities, they have other assets and are usually able to mobilize more quickly and with greater collective efficacy. In most rural communities, residents take on multiples roles; someone may be a local businessman as well as part of the volunteer fire department, on the town council and a member of a service club (Reimer & Markey, 2008). The advantage of multiple roles is that one person is familiar with many aspects of the community. The disadvantage is, of course, that there are fewer people to draw on for input and those people can become overtaxed.

Rural communities often have stronger cultural identities and higher levels of social capital, which can help foster collective actions. Given the nature of rural communities, place-based approaches offer a relevant and practical framework that can be tailored and adapted to their needs. It can align with their unique assets, socioeconomic conditions and identities.

## **Types of Place-Based Approaches and Characteristics**

Central to place-based approaches is the idea that in order to improve the lives of individuals and families, it is essential to strengthen the community in which they live. While place-based approaches can be initiated from different fronts and can tackle a wide variety of issues, they tend to concentrate on two lines of work: human development/social services (education, healthcare, family well-being, workforce development) and physical revitalization/economic development (affordable housing, commercial revitalization, community development corporations, etc.) (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown & Dewar, 2010).

During the past decade, governments and agencies in Canada have adopted a number of place-based initiatives in public health, poverty alleviation, public safety, economic development, Aboriginal community planning, child and senior services, and homelessness. Some notable Canadian place-based initiatives include the Local Immigration Partnership Program, Homelessness Partnering Strategy, Community Futures Program, Models Program, New Rural Economies Project, the Vibrant Communities project and the Literacy Now project.

While the scale, focus and intensity of place-based approaches differ, Bellefontaine and Wisener (2011) describe these initiatives as “having several key characteristics which include multi-sectoral stakeholders, leveraging local knowledge and assets, shared stakeholder ownership of the initiatives, pooled resources

and entwined accountability” (p. 7). According to Kubisch, Auspos, Brown and Dewar (2010), most place-based approaches:

- Are defined by a geographic area targeted for change, and this area is the administrative launch pad for the initiative.
- Explicitly link people and place dimensions to the work of addressing the issue.
- Place priority on “community building” and highlight the socio, cultural, economic and organizational attributes of the community and populations.
- Analyze needs through a comprehensive lens and make links between social, economic, physical and civic development.
- Mobilize support through resident engagement, ownership and community-based activities.
- Work on multiple levels and with multiple agencies that influence and align policy and practices so that they both can support community needs.

A major distinction between place-based approaches and traditional strategies is that decision-making and other responsibilities are often diffused and shared at many different levels. While multi-level sharing can make the process more challenging, as reaching consensus is often difficult requiring compromises and trade-offs (Bellefontaine & Wisener, 2011), ultimately, the degree of collaboration and stakeholder engagement is the key to securing community buy-in and improving the effectiveness of the initiative. Working with a variety of actors also means a certain level of flexibility must be practiced, as place-based initiatives often follow an emergent learning process that evolves and shifts as discussions progress (Bellefontaine & Wisener, 2011).

The first LES plan in any community is an essential beginning place. The research communities had eight months to assemble a multi-sectored planning group and create a plan containing feasible actions. The communities will act on those plans in the coming year, which is outside the timeline of the research project. During the planning stage, each community identified action items that would be realistically achievable.

In BC, where the place-based planning process for literacy and essential skills has been going on for 12 years in more than 100 communities, plans are updated every year to meet changing needs. The communities have learned how to engage various stakeholder groups over time, and are able to build on previous actions from year to year. Actions in communities have deepened over the 12 years, particularly as partnerships mature, funding is proven, and awareness about the importance of various initiatives increases.

The communities involved in the research project each took different approaches to the planning process, although the approach was outlined and each community followed the same timeline. Some communities had an initial town hall meeting early in the process to gather people’s thoughts and get input about issues. Other communities spent more time conducting individual and focus group interviews before holding a larger meeting to talk about solutions.

## **Traditional and Emergent Place-Based Approaches**

For the past 20 years, many of the traditional place-based approaches are associated with Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs). In most of these place-based approaches, comprehensiveness was the focus and objective of the initiative; they frequently analyzed community problems and assets holistically and achieved multiple results with a combination of inputs (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown & Dewar, 2010). In most of these initiatives, the community developed a plan and an implementation structure in order to respond to community issues in a comprehensive way. Furthermore, in most of these traditional place-based approaches, community capacity building principles and practices were incorporated in a variety of ways to engage community stakeholders.

As place-based approaches evolved, practitioners increasingly recognized that working on all fronts may not be feasible and can lead to drifting from the goals and focus (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown & Dewar, 2010). Emerging place-based approaches often search for the right balance between appreciating the complex and systemic nature of problems and finding feasible and focused solutions. These new approaches find strategic entry points for structuring the work and focus on single issues or outcomes that can be attainable (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown & Dewar, 2010). In many ways, most of these more focused place-based initiatives stay true to the principles and practices used in traditional place-based interventions in that the initiatives bring a comprehensive analysis to the cause of the problem, make connections to other domains of work, and recognize that the community has an influence on the problem. However, the main difference between emergent place-based approaches and traditional ones is that their focus and goals are much more feasible in terms of capacity and resources.

Because of the short timeline for this project, the research communities were encouraged to focus on one issue and plan actions that they thought were achievable in the short term with the resources they had. They were able to identify a number of issues but then chose the most pressing one or two, or the one for which they could identify a fairly immediate solution and/or available resources.

While emergent place-based initiatives are often smaller in scope, in some ways, they are much more rigorous. Many emergent place-based initiatives are more committed to research, theory of change methodologies, collective impacts, data collection (longitudinal), ongoing evaluations (formative and summative), evidence-based decisions and continuous program improvement (Auspos & Kubisch, 2012). As the number of place-based initiatives has increased over the past two decades, a stronger evidence base is emerging concerning what kinds of models, structures and practices work more effectively, under different contexts and conditions.

## **Place-Based Models**

Place-based efforts bring a comprehensive analysis to the cause of local issues and share similar community engagement practices; however, how the efforts are initiated, delivered and are administered can vary widely. Three models that are most commonly used for place-based initiatives were identified based on literature reviews and practice. These models are often dependent on the purpose of the initiative, how it is funded, operating jurisdiction and/or government level, location contexts and assets. While these three place-based models are not definitive, and many place-based initiatives blend certain elements together, they are useful to explain and to classify some structural differences in how place-based initiatives are designed.

### ***Single Institution Model***

In the single institution model, a single organization or agency leads and manages the place-based initiative. One agency can either work independently with the community or can build partnerships with other organizations to address community issues. Services can also either be delivered solely by the lead organization or the lead organization can diffuse services to other partners yet still manage the initiative. In most cases, an existing organization spearheads the initiative; however, at times, an entirely new organization can be created to either initiate or deliver the initiative. In many cases, the single agency essentially acts as a backbone organization, drives the initiative and manages the administrative, coordination and communication aspects, as well as having the final say in the decision-making processes. There are many examples of single institution place-based models: Harlem Children's Zone and Pathways to Education in Canada are several of the most recognized.

### ***Consortium Model***

Another model sometimes used in place-based initiatives could be explained as a community consortium. In this model, either a group of organizations come together or a wide range of local community partners and/or stakeholders are brought together to form a committee to initiate, drive and direct a place-based initiative. By its very nature, a community consortium model is more collaborative and is designed to represent different interests of a community. In this model, many members have a say in the direction and strategy of the initiative, and how it is implemented. In some cases, the consortium eventually becomes an organization of its own; in other cases, its role is to guide, oversee the initiative and be independent from the implementation of the intervention and the actual service delivery. An example of this type of model is the Local Immigration Partnership initiative.

### ***External or Franchise Model***

In many place-based efforts, an external model or franchise model is utilized. In this model, the driver of the initiative is led by an external agency not located in the community. This external organization sets up, provides technical assistance and supports local institutions in order to develop a place-based initiative. This type of model is usually initiated by a foundation, research or policy organization and/or innovation center. Many times, the goal of these types of place-based initiatives is to test and demonstrate if certain models, practices or approaches can be replicable and scalable under different contexts, service providers and conditions. In many cases, the external agency essentially becomes an intermediary that comes into a community, brings local actors together, supports capacity development, modifies existing services and ensures for quality. An example of this type of model is the Vibrant Communities initiative.

Sometimes a combination of models is used. The research project for community literacy and essential skills development used a combination of the external/franchise model and the consortium model. The impetus for the project came from an external organization, but a wide range of local community partners/stakeholders were invited to participate in discussions about the challenges of the community and potential solutions. A core group of interested community representatives, called a task group in the research project, led the initiative and met regularly to lay out the approach for discussions, identify people who could, or needed to be, involved and examine the results of multiple discussions. The core group made recommendations about how to group goals and actions and which ones were most reasonable to be the first actions. The task group advised and monitored the community facilitator who conducted individual interviews, arranged for focus group and large group meetings, and did the actual writing of the plan. In Gold River, the community champion took on the role of a task group until community

discussions, led by the provincial partner organization, generated enough interest to form a larger task group. This group will guide the actions that were identified in the plan.

## PLACE-BASED PRACTICE

### Community Engagement Practices

Effective place-based initiatives often use different sets of community engagement activities to strengthen community capacity to identify, address and develop solutions to community issues. According to Kubisch, Auspos, Brown and Dewar (2010), there are four main areas related to building the capacities of communities: leadership development, organization capacity, community connectedness (social capital) and community planning/organizing.

Participants in the research community discussions and activities noted that the planning process led to the building of some capacity in the community. First of all, some communities had not had discussions about literacy and essential skills ever or for some time. Merely having those discussions created new thinking about how issues in the community could be addressed, or raised issues that many people were not aware of. In Saskatchewan, the people who were facilitating the discussion were from business, economic and community development backgrounds. Talking about literacy and essential skills provided new leadership opportunities for them.

The actions that resulted from community plans engaged various organizations and created increased capacity. For example, the library in Hudson Bay will now offer courses in resume writing, interview skills and finding jobs online. Though librarians were assisting people with these tasks informally, they will now have partnerships to assist in this work and a more formal structure of delivery.

All of the research communities now have initial plans for assisting groups of people with LES-related learning. In the process of developing the plans, new connections were made between organizations and people that will assist them to continue planning for LES and, potentially, to support them in further collaborations.

Most place-based initiatives attempt to make the engagement process very inclusive. A potential challenge is the degree of community participation; what one initiative may describe as “deep community engagement” might appear to another as “occasional community consultation” (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown & Dewar, 2010). The question of how a community figures into the plan or fits into the theory of change differs based on the type of initiative and mandate.

Also, how members of the community participate in place-based planning and action depends on the history and the culture of the community as well as on the personalities who live there. Some communities already have a culture of collaboration and others have a culture of silos which creates competition for funding and supports. The culture of the community affects how efficiently a plan can be made and how effectively the plan can be carried out. In one research community, the coordinator of the project said that one long-time resident says refuses everything first, and it takes some convincing to make this refusal into assent. People in the community generally know about these kinds of idiosyncrasies and have learned what to expect; sometimes, they have learned how to handle them or know who can.

The place-based approach ensures that the community striving for change is at the heart of that change, and is inclusive. Therefore, the identity of the community, whether it is francophone, bilingual, multilingual or multicultural is automatically at the heart of defining the change for that community. However, it is possible that change might be achieved more quickly and easily when the community is homogeneous in language and culture. For example, the mostly francophone community of Hearst was able to mobilize quite quickly. There was an automatic shared understanding about the identity of the community. Kapuskasing is comprised of about equal numbers of French and English. Though planning discussions were conducted in French, input was received from English-speaking people and agencies. This input was important in terms of making the plan inclusive for all people in the community. Some communities contain Aboriginal populations who live on the outskirts of the community or who are not used to being engaged or who see themselves as separate from the mainstream population. In diverse communities, it is possible to leave out some groups, depending on who is driving the change. In order to be inclusive, careful consideration needs to be given to the makeup of the community and what will be required to engage all groups.

Effective community engagement can be used as a crucial tool for advancing community change goals and has long been a cornerstone aspect of place-based work (Harder and Company Community Research, 2011). In place-based initiatives, community engagement can be seen as a means to an end, or as end in itself (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown & Dewar, 2010). Indeed, in the research communities, just having the time and space for people to talk with each other helped to develop ideas about how to make a more effective community. Even in small communities, not everyone knows each other or knows what each organization is doing. The process relies heavily on the coordinator or facilitator, and there must be trust in that person and the facilitating organization for the process to be effective.

While community engagement is a crucial part of place-based work, it is not necessary or useful to be a part of every stage of an initiative; community feedback at different points of a place-based plan often requires different engagement strategies, often with different partners (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown & Dewar, 2010). Ideally, the place-based initiative should be adaptable as well as intentionally focused on the challenge(s) at hand (Auspos & Kubisch, 2012).

Though the research communities all used the tools of individual interviews, focus groups and town hall meetings, they engaged in this process using different timelines. One community held the town hall meeting at the beginning, followed by focus groups and individual interviews. The task group used the information that was gathered to make decisions about what to put in the plan and where to start. Other communities did individual interviews and focus groups first, bringing the information collected to the town hall meeting for a discussion about solutions to identified challenges. Interested community members were kept informed by email in all cases.

## **The Role of Intermediaries**

As place-based approaches bring together a wide variety of stakeholders from within the community, from various sectors and from different levels, the role of an outside intermediary is often used as a broker to help counterbalance power inequities, ensure that the process is inclusive, keep partners true to the mission and marry the interests of different stakeholders (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown & Dewar, 2010). In many cases, the sponsoring foundation or lead organization of the place-based initiative assumes the role of the intermediary. In other cases, the lead organization can be an independent consultant. Outside intermediaries are often used to break down silos, align public, private and community stakeholders, and

conduct place-based practices that require more support and/or technical capacity than the community has internally. The roles and functions that intermediaries assume in place-based initiatives can vary based on the nature and purpose of the initiative. Listed below are some of the mediating functions intermediaries may use to support place-based initiatives, as illustrated by Kubisch, Auspos, Brown and Dewar (2010):

- Gather data and provide technical assistance
- Convene discussions and hold forums
- Facilitate partnerships and coalitions
- Advocate for the community
- Assist with the processes of setting the vision, planning, implementation and evaluation
- Resolve conflicts and manage communications
- Broker relations with outside actors and stakeholders
- Keep true to the missions

In essence, successful examples of place-based initiatives value intermediaries. As outside “brokers,” intermediaries are often able to analyze the self-interests of different stakeholders, find common areas of opportunities, support and identify specific actions that will benefit the community, develop strategies that can mobilize the community and provide technical assistance where capacity is limited.

Though most of the research communities hired facilitators who live in the communities, the specific provincial or national LES partner (Saskatchewan Literacy Network or RESDAC) and Decoda Literacy Solutions provided more objective assistance. These intermediaries were able to provide background, as well as examples and advice about possible ways to handle planning challenges. They also gave examples of the actions that other communities have taken to address some issues.

The City of Victoria, British Columbia was undertaking a place-based strategy at about the same time as the Strengthening Rural Canada Project. Although Victoria is not rural and was not part of this project, its process and plan were compared to the process and plans of the communities in the SRC project. In Victoria, a consultant was hired to guide the community through an extensive LES planning process, funded through grants from community foundations. The entire process took almost two years. Starting with a day-long community-wide forum, the consultant took the information from this meeting and then recruited people to assemble a strategy team to take the results further. The team met four times over the course of four months. The consultant kept the process focused, and on track. He designed the questions for each session, recorded the sessions, and took notes. He then brought a more detailed plan to work from for the next session. By the end, he was able to produce an “LES outcomes roadmap” that the strategy team was happy with. The team then took the roadmap to the broader community and asked community members to mark where they were on the map and what they thought the priorities were. Victoria has since set up task groups to implement the actions that were considered most important and most achievable.

## **Place-Based Activities and Practices**

Place-based practices and activities that are typically used generally fall under the following categories: Community outreach and organizing, knowledge building and analysis activities, planning exercises, actions and implementation strategies, and evaluations.

### **Community Outreach and Organizing Activities**

Community outreach and organizing activities are typically used as a way to build momentum and engage community residents about the purpose of the initiative. According to Burns and Brown (2012), community engagement is used as a way to accomplish one or more of the following key functions:

- Gain knowledge of the community
- Establish relationships and build mutual trust
- Identify shared interests and develop shared goals
- Build local implementation capacity
- Develop local leadership

Community outreach and organizing activities can be interviews, public consultations and forums, events, and door-to-door campaigns.

During the research project, community leaders conducted individual interviews and held small focus groups with specific members of the community. These activities helped to raise awareness and garnish ideas to bring forward to larger meetings. They also encouraged participation from community members who might not attend or speak up at public forums. Larger and more inclusive meetings created bigger conversations where people could build on each other's ideas and grapple with the challenges that they see in the community. The larger format helped people to understand each other and to share what they were each currently doing. Holding this meeting was an important part of the place-based approach and integral to its success.

### **Knowledge Building and Analysis Activities**

In order to develop a better understanding of what the community issues are, a comprehensive understanding of the current state and conditions of a community is important. Knowledge building and analysis activities are usually done to gather evidence (both qualitative and quantitative) that can identify important conditions, as well as capture insights that are affecting a community. Typical activities used to build knowledge include a review of existing community literature and research; past projects and initiatives; analysis of publicly available community statistical data sets; consultation with key stakeholders, surveys and focus groups; asset-mapping exercises; identifying strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities; and threats (SWOT) analysis.

Most importantly, the people in the community share their knowledge when they are in a room together. For example, people who work in early childhood share their understanding about services in the community and the issues that children are experiencing. Adult education providers can provide information about the education opportunities available for the parents of those children. The information shared across sectors often leads to new ideas about how services can work together.

## Planning Exercises

Community planning process activities are often “structured” in a way that provides a platform for residents and stakeholders to work together to produce a plan of action, which reflects a community’s visions and goals around a particular issue. Ideally, the planning process should provide a means for community stakeholders to voice their ideas and perspectives and build a consensus on a plan that can guide and legitimize following actions (Cornerstone Consulting Group, 2002). The planning process should also be a way to transmit community information and data so that residents can be better informed about some of the issues that are affecting the community. According to Burns and Brown’s work (2012), community planning is an important engagement tool because it serves many functions and provides a way to:

- Build and strengthen relationships with different community stakeholders.
- Provide a platform for different types of stakeholders to express their particular interests and concerns to one another, allowing conflicting views to be heard and debated.
- Build consensus on priorities that can guide later implementation steps.
- Allow community stakeholders to discover opportunities to assemble complementary resources and expertise, thus providing a stronger foundation for plan implementation.
- Draw attention to the community and its issues among larger prospective internal and external stakeholders.

## Actions and Implementation Strategies

Implementing community based plans, taking actions and managing a place-based initiative with a wide range of stakeholders, is not a simple or easy endeavor to accomplish. By their very nature, place-based initiatives are messy and ambiguous. At the core of the place-based work is the ability to work with multiple partners at the community level, which is considered to be an iterative learning process. This process allows stakeholders to continuously adjust strategies in response to the community needs. During the process, actions and implementation strategies should be designed to deepen relationships and strengthen collective efficacy to effectively create and implement solutions. According to Harder and Company Community Research (2011), leadership and staff capacity with strong organizational, communication skills, political acumen, as well as an ability to work across a number of sectors at once is important. Furthermore, leadership requires a talent for convening, facilitating, and mediating parties who have conflicting interests (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown & Dewar, 2010).

Managing a place-based initiative often presents challenges. Due to the inherent complexity of place based work, there is often a need to develop more formalized management structures that can support cross sector partnerships, as well as include broader community participation. According to Harder and Company Community Research (2011), there are three major management tasks that are often required to support the implementation of place based initiatives:

- Maintaining a large number of productive working relationships.
- Ensuring that a wide range of activities and investments are geared in a mutually reinforcing way toward shared goals.

- Creating accountability structures that promote individual and organizational commitment to these shared goals.

In the early stages of community LES planning in British Columbia, community representatives identified the need for a local literacy coordinator. These coordinators would keep developing the conversation about literacy and assist partners to take the actions that were identified. A core planning group called a literacy task group continued to work with the coordinators. Over time, the literacy coordinators in BC have gained the trust of their community members and are able to facilitate the solving of complex issues identified by their task groups. Now, when members of the communities have ideas or challenges around literacy and skill development, they turn to the literacy coordinators who connect them with the people and organizations that can help. If a larger community issue is identified, the coordinator convenes a community forum to discuss this issue.

As place-based initiatives progress, there is a need to develop clear and well-defined structures and processes. While these structures and processes will be different based on the nature of the place-based initiative and assets in the community, management structures and protocols should be clear and transparent. Harder and Company Community Research (2011) suggests that effective management structures and processes for place based work should include:

- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities, operating structures, procedures, and financial protocols
- Transparent distribution of resources.
- A set of defined expectations that hold each of the initiatives partners accountable to one another and to the initiatives goals.
- Open avenues of communication.

When working with multiple stakeholders, many place-based initiatives frequently use standard management practices such as memorandums of understanding (MOUs), terms and conditions, guiding principles, and other coordinating management tools to establish clear guidelines.

Decoda Literacy Solutions and communities in British Columbia have developed terms of reference for literacy task groups, job descriptions for literacy coordinators, and steward organizations that manage the literacy coordinator position. The distribution of resources for coordinated LES work is transparent to all of the stakeholders. There are clearly-defined expectations and accountabilities, as well as designated provincial supports, training opportunities and avenues for sharing knowledge.

## RESULTS-BASED MANAGEMENT

Many place-based initiatives use results or outcome based management practices to align multiple partners and actions to the specific goals of the initiative, regardless of structures or purpose of the initiative (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown & Dewar, 2010). According to Harder and Company Community Research (2011), results based management practices are used to inculcate a culture of results and accountability with the intended goal to inject a relentless focus on specific outcomes which are used as a guide for specific actions and choices made by partners of place based work. The starting point for any performance management plan in any place-based initiative is a shared vision among stakeholders and clarification of each stakeholder's roles and responsibilities in achieving the collective goals (Auspos & Kubisch, 2012). When the change required and the goals to reach that change are well-articulated, they can guide and clarify what each of the various stakeholders is responsible for and what they have to do to

produce the intended outcomes. As such, goals and actions need to be grounded with a fair amount of detail and not be vague. Auspos and Kubisch (2012) further suggest that performance management contain:

- Performance planning: setting goals, data requirements, and performance standards
- Performance measurement: collecting information on each stakeholder's performance and group progress toward the collective goals
- Performance management: reviewing the data to diagnose problems and develop strategies to improve stakeholder performance

There is often some confusion over the difference between performance management and evaluation. The key difference is that managers use performance management for course correction, while evaluation is used to assess the outcomes of an intervention. In order to manage performance, key place-based stakeholders must review the data continuously and systematically to determine if they are on the right track. Comparing the actual performance with expected targets allows place-based participants to pinpoint where things are moving along and where there are some potential issues (Auspos & Kubisch, 2012). Results based management practices have the ability to structure place based actions in a clear and focused manner that is designed to reach specific goals.

Place-based initiatives vary considerably in terms of their objectives, approaches, instruments and implementation. These differences impact the shape and nature of the evaluation. According to Burstein and Tolley (2011), there are few common place-based evaluation approaches due to their amorphous nature, and they feature a wide range of frameworks, strategies and activities (2011). Evaluations, when done well, can help us understand which interventions work best under what conditions and identify which innovations can be scaled or replicated in other areas (ibid). Accessing community data, setting benchmarks, measuring capacity building, determining the attributions of long-term outcomes and accountability can also present many challenges. While evaluation frameworks are still a work in progress, they are crucial for the sustainability of these kinds of initiatives and allow for continuous development.

Overall, according to Sridharan (2011), place-based evaluations should utilize a theory of change methodology by deploying an emergent learning framework, being transparent about the evaluation techniques, enhancing the evidence base, determining if the intervention is working and generalizing key learnings as well as unintended consequences. Sridharan further states that some common practices can guide better place-based evaluations:

- Use an evaluation framework based on theory of change or a logic model
- Capture both qualitative and quantitative data
- Base evaluation on realistic expectations
- Capture real-time and emergent learnings
- Be transparent and clear to the community

There are two parts to results monitoring and evaluation in a place-based approach. One part is about monitoring and evaluating the process of developing a plan or deciding on actions. The other part is about monitoring and evaluating how well the activities are addressing the issue that is at the heart of the approach.

As the research planning project was not funded beyond the planning year, overall evaluation and results monitoring are only about the development of the plan. The evaluation of individual actions in each community will need to take place outside of the research. Plans include statements about how each community plans to assess the impact of immediate actions.

In British Columbia, where literacy planning has been ongoing for many years, looking at the effects of actions taken as well as monitoring the efficiency and success of the planning process itself is possible. Indicators about how the process is working involve the number of partnerships and collaborations, number and type of representation on task groups and advisory committees, numbers of initiatives, and evidence of increased awareness about literacy and essential skills.

Indicators of effective actions to increase literacy skills have been related to initial objectives about more people attending adult literacy programs, more family literacy programs offered in communities, and more funding for literacy work. Therefore, data has been collected about numbers and types of programs, attendance in programs, evidence of literacy awareness, and funding generated at the community level.

As the conversation in BC communities has expanded, additional data has been collected about the number of and attendance in a variety of programs for school-aged children, youth and seniors. Data collection includes information about the goals identified by the community, and whether those goals have been reached. These questions inform the work of the community for the next year: what changes need to be made?

In the research project, the following indicators of success related to the literacy and essential skills place-based approach and plan development were monitored:

### **1. Community connections are created**

- How many people are talking about/engaged in discussions about LES?
- Who are they, and where are they coming from? (employment, education, health, library services, justice)
- What is the growth of the conversation over time? Does the conversation move from a focus on one age group or segment of the population to others, for example?
- How many relationships/partnerships are developed for delivering initiatives?
- How many connections are there between the planning task group and various other groups in the community?

### **2. Actions are identified to improve the community and learning in the community**

- How many ideas for improving community and learning are generated?
- How many ideas are feasible? How many can actually be implemented?
- What is the depth and breadth of ideas? What is the level of impact of ideas?

### **3. Awareness is created about literacy and essential skills and the importance of continuous learning**

- What are some examples of comments and actions that indicate increased understanding?
- How many learning events (e.g. family literacy day) are held?
- How many people attend learning events?

Longer-term outcomes and indicators that are more about the effectiveness of supporting literacy development are similar to those that are currently used in British Columbia:

#### **4. People in communities participate in learning opportunities**

- How many learning programs are in the community?
- What are the types and variety of learning programs in the community?
- How many people (by age groupings) are participating in programs?

#### **5. Levels of literacy and essential skills are increased in communities**

- What are some examples of comments and actions that indicate that people have stronger skills?
- Are programs reporting increased progress for individuals?
- How many more people are employed in the community?

In terms of determining progress against the outcome of increased literacy and essential skills, BC now has a database for adult literacy programs. The database uses a common assessment tool to show the learning progress of adults in those programs. This data can be collated to monitor progress toward the overall goal. It can also assist in determining where more program support might be required.

It would also be possible to start to suggest more finely-tuned common goals for communities in the province. For example, these goals could have to do with ensuring that all Grade 4 students are reading at grade level in the community, or ensuring that all students graduate with Grade 12 level reading skills.

### **Collective Impacts and Backbone Support Organizations**

A relatively new approach that is gaining considerable traction in place-based work and in other social service and policy fields are Collective Impact. Defined as “long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem” (Kania & Kramer, 2011), Collective Impact can serve as a framework to align efforts by multiple agencies and partners to achieve better results. According to Born (2013), the underlying premise of Collective Impact is that no single organization can create change on complex social issues when they work alone. As such, change requires a collaborative approach that involves multiple stakeholders coordinating their efforts and working together around clearly-defined goals, which is very much the essence of place based work.

The work in BC is a good example of Collective Impact, since it has been ongoing since 2004 and brings together many important players in each community. The social issue of ensuring that people have the literacy and essential skills required in a knowledge-based, technologically-pervasive society is complex and requires cross-sectoral support.

It is generally considered that there are five broad conditions of collective success; common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and backbone support organizations (Kania & Kramer, 2011). While all of these conditions are important to consider in achieving collective impacts in place-based work, in terms of actions and implementation strategies, the role of a backbone support organization can often determine the success or failure of an initiative as a whole (Born, 2013). According to Kania and Kramer (2011):

The backbone organization requires a dedicated staff separate from the participating organizations that can plan, manage, and support the initiative through ongoing facilitation, technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the

initiative to function smoothly. Regardless of the structure of the place-based initiative, it is important that there is some form of lead or backbone organization that can drive and bring stakeholders together to achieve collective impacts (p. 40).

Decoda Literacy Solutions is the “backbone” organization for the more than 100 communities in British Columbia who have community literacy/skills development plans. In the beginning, Decoda visited every community to help them understand the place-based solutions model and how to get started. Over the years, Decoda has distributed funding and provided facilitation for the planning meetings when needed. The organization has been asked to join the meetings as the “authority” when there are challenges that cannot be resolved within the community task groups. Decoda has not been prescriptive in its role, but has provided guidance, respecting the community process, the community players, the community vision, and community needs. In addition, Decoda has provided measurement and evaluation tools and has managed the data provided by each community every year. It has advocated for ongoing funding and brokered relationships with provincial-level stakeholders.

## **EVALUATION AND LEARNINGS FROM THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

There was considerable passion behind the discussions in the research communities. For community development and economic development people, seeing the link between their areas of work and LES was an eye-opening experience. Similarly, businesspeople realized the link between their skill requirements and LES. These important realizations made people dig into thinking about what needs to happen to ensure that residents of communities have the skills that they need.

It was helpful that the project encouraged broad thinking; it was not just about reading but about all essential skills. The discussion encouraged thinking about all the issues of the community and how skill development could assist with solutions – as well as how solutions could assist with skill development. Having a small script – but not too much – was helpful, so that facilitators could speak genuinely to their individual communities. This flexibility relieved pressure and allowed relationships to build in their own ways.

All rural communities seemingly have similar issues (lack of public transportation, youth out-migration, lack of volunteers and key essential services), but the ways that they address those and the process that they are able to go through to resolve these issues are quite different.

If the facilitator is not a literacy practitioner, it is more difficult to extrapolate the literacy pieces from the community discussions. Literacy practitioners are able to see the links to skill development in the various issues of the community. Conversely, training for literacy practitioners in the language and goals of economic development would be helpful.

In Ontario and BC, communities had had more discussions about literacy and essential skills prior to the planning project than the communities in Saskatchewan. This was probably because BC and Ontario each have “infrastructures of support” that consistently bring attention to literacy and essential skills, resulting in a greater general awareness of LES in those two provinces. In BC, there is a network of community literacy coordinators and many local literacy organizations and programs. In Ontario, there are also many local literacy programs and organizations as well as regional support organizations.

Prior to the planning process, even very small communities were segmented, and these segments were not talking to each other. As a result of the LES planning approach, there was more discussion and interaction between the various aspects of communities. This resulted in immediate actions that likely would not have happened otherwise. For example, in at least two of the communities, the LES plan is being integrated with the official community plans of the municipalities. There is some hope that the integration will help to ensure that the actions identified in the plan will be widely supported.

There were aspects to the place-based planning approach that were difficult. Getting the conversation going was hard in some places because it was new and people had not thought about it before, or for a long time. In other cases, interest was difficult to generate because the conversation had been going on for some time and people were tiring of the subject, even though they were making progress on the issue.

Related to this is the fact that the lead community organization and/or facilitator must create or claim its own “authority” to bring people together to have the discussion. The clout behind the research project was that it was nationally funded. However, there was no funding for implementing the plans and no funding to carry out iterative planning and action over time. The motivation for making a plan had to come from wanting to do the right thing for the community and the people residing in it.

Having someone who was paid to initiate and continue the discussion as well as do the work arising from it was helpful, and people became excited as they began to think about what they could do.

Each community plan looks different. All plans follow a template of topics and questions to be answered; however, the goals, actions, themes, and outcomes are laid out either in tables, or more narratively, depending on what makes sense to the community task group. By their nature, initial community plans are fairly simple since they must start with actions that are most immediately feasible. This is also true for the research communities. The ongoing plans of communities from across BC are more mature in that there has been time for considerable action and the plans build each year. By comparison, the community literacy plan for Victoria is a complex document covering every facet of literacy delivery, as well as the policy development and support that needs to accompany it. The Victoria plan is a comprehensive roadmap that was facilitated by experienced planners with helpful technology not available to most communities. Despite this advantage, further time must be taken for community members to identify individual actions related to the topics of the plan. The simpler community plans of the research project are more “nimble” in nature.

Importantly, all communities affirmed that receiving funding for implementing actions would have changed the dynamic of the planning discussions enormously. People would likely identify different and possibly more in-depth actions if there was funding both for actions and for iterative planning over a longer period of time because there would be a greater possibility of fully addressing LES issues. Engaging people and coming up with actions was more difficult when there was no funding immediately available. There are likely a number of ways to provide this kind of funding, including seed money that communities match. However, most critically, the funding has to match the place-based philosophy of being in the control of the community.

## **Community Connections**

People from various parts of the community participated in the planning process. They came from employment agencies, libraries, schools, colleges, public health, municipalities, Chambers of Commerce, literacy organizations, community service organizations, businesses, service clubs, justice, First Nations and immigrant groups. There were also interested citizens involved – people who wanted to participate in the

place where they live. In every community, there was an expectation that very few people would attend the town hall meetings, as there is seldom very good turnout for such meetings. In every case, community facilitators were surprised by the number of people who attended – between 10 and 36 people at each one. In the small community of Gold River, 36 passionate people attended the community meeting.

In addition, over 100 more people in the six pilot communities were engaged individually and in small groups. As the actions from the planning process are developing, more people are coming forward to participate.

The planning process furthered a number of collaborations that already existed and sometimes created new ones. These collaborations were not formalized partnerships. Indeed, formalized partnerships are rare in small, rural communities. More usually, people just agree to work together and begin to do so.

In one community, the Chamber of the Commerce and the Town were not working closely before this project; however, they are now planning to take on a project together. Their relationship has changed as a result of the planning process. In another community, several organizations made an application for funding together when they would normally have each applied and been in competition with each other. In another community, the First Nations band is participating in the development of the plan in collaboration with the school district administration.

### **Identified Actions**

A total of 111 possible actions were identified by the six research communities in their community plans. Of these, at least 10 actions were taken either immediately or within the first few months following the planning process. The complete community literacy and essential skills plans from the project can be found at the Strengthening Rural Canada website ([StrengtheningRuralCanada.ca](http://StrengtheningRuralCanada.ca)).

At least 75 unique organizations are identified as participants in possible actions. In all of the research communities, municipal representation was present at the community discussions and at least two communities will integrate the literacy and essential skills plans into their overall municipal plans.

Interestingly, though it is difficult for people and organizations to see how they can take on in-depth actions that require more funding, there is a certain amount of competitiveness about who “gets” to do the work, or about who “owns” it. Conversely, many organizations do not see LES support as their responsibility until they understand how skill improvement will be an immediate benefit to them. In the end, the development of basic skills is everyone’s responsibility and there is enough work for everyone.

The planning conversation is usually quite vague at the beginning. People raise issues like the lack of services and transportation. Eventually the discussion moves to more specifics that have to do with immediate problems and more possible solutions. People start to talk about what they can actually do, what is physically and financially possible. This conversation shift narrows the discussion in terms of actions.

The discussion and actions also depend on who is participating in the discussion at any given time; one group could change the direction of the conversation. For example, a conversation with recent immigrants produced the realization that they require upfront assistance when they arrive in the community. People did not know of this issue before, so an action to resolve it became a more immediate part of that community’s plan.

An initial motivator for participation such as the local closure of the college campus can change as the group begins to think of other ways to provide training and use local expertise. For example, a

partnership between the library and local businesses could replace some of the college services that are now missing.

In all communities, there was a discussion about volunteerism. Initially, this discussion was about the lack of volunteers, the need for young people to volunteer, and the exhaustion of the few people who do volunteer. This discussion evolved to be about appreciating volunteers and understanding what is learned when people volunteer. Important questions were raised, such as “Is there a way to be more intentional about that learning? Can the learning be linked to other parts of people’s lives?”

In one community, people were concerned about the closure of the local college campus. In addition, Service Canada support had been reduced. The library was receiving more and more requests for support with resumes and filling out government forms. After some discussion, the library and several businesses decided to offer computer, budgeting, and resume-writing courses at the library.

In many communities family resource programs (mostly early learning programs) are well established. Mostly, they are focused on the outcomes for children. Adult LES programs are not as common and are more difficult to establish or embed. The discussion about adults who are not skilled is more difficult because of the stigma attached to not having these skills. The language that is used to talk about adult learning programs is an important consideration. Reducing stigma can be assisted by situating programs at a college or continuing education part of a school district. Consequently, people going to the LES program are part of a larger group of adults who are continuing education in a variety of ways.

The way that funding is provided can also make the delivery of adult literacy programs more difficult. For example, some funding can only be applied to programs for specific cultural groups, notably francophone, anglophone or First Nations. In small communities, this selective funding can make delivery almost impossible since there are not enough people in any one group to make a viable program, or the intervention is then too visible as a literacy program. As a result, people will not attend, or the administration and reporting for several funding streams is untenable.

Communities may need to start slowly with small interventions and work toward broader and bigger adult literacy interventions. Having an organization or person with a vision for LES present in the community is critical to the continuity of focus on LES delivery. Without this type of paid support, everyone forgets about literacy and essential skills.

## **Awareness**

Planning for literacy and essential skills introduced new language to some communities. People began to share their experiences about what client groups are facing in terms of the need for skills. A common theme raised in every community was the difficulty that people have with government forms. As these increasingly need to be filled out online, many people are struggling to either find what they need or fill out the forms.

There was increased awareness and some alarm about what children are not learning at school. For example, some schools do not teach how to read analog clocks or how to make monetary change; the computerized world has changed the kinds of things that are taught at school. This observation led to discussions about where responsibility lies for some kinds of learning, and when certain skills should be taught. Perhaps there is some confusion about what the role of the school is and what the role of the parent is. What do parents need to be teaching and what do schools teach? Are there family literacy programs in

the community and who is going to those programs? How can various agencies support the kinds of learning that need to happen at home? How can there be more awareness about supportive programs?

Employers reported lack of creative thinking, motivation and math skills. There was considerable discussion about how people learn those skills, as well as when and where they learn them. Whose responsibility is it to teach those things?

In some resource-based communities, people expressed concern regarding the academic skills of young people graduating from high school. If gaining employment within these resource-based industries only requires proof of a Grade 12 diploma, a student may focus only on meeting the minimum credit requirements for graduation. Consequently, some graduates who wish to further their training and education may not meet all the admission requirements for post-secondary programming.

### **Observations About Place-Based Planning:**

- Connectivity equals vibrancy in the community. If large community service organizations do not participate, it is difficult to make the plan because major community programs are not clearly identified or able to participate in possible actions. However, it is important to work with those people who want to work with you. If you wait for everyone that you think should be at the table, you will likely never get started.
- Community planning is vague and hard to explain at first. You just have to get into it.
- The “culture” of a community makes a difference. For example, where people are used to working together, the place-based approach and planning process is much easier.
- Separate cultures within the community can be hard to integrate. This does not mean just language groups, but can apply to diverse ways of thinking, age groups and others.
- The process of planning is as important, or possibly more important, than the actual plan. This is because the process builds the relationships critical for acting on solutions.
- Relationships play a pivotal role in the place-based planning process.
- Influential people in the community make a difference –either positive or negative.
- The approach to place-based planning and action varies from place to place, and it must be flexible or it does not work.
- Identifying issues is easier for people, but thinking about solutions is more difficult. Putting aside funding considerations and thinking about what needs to happen is helpful. If we had the funding, what would we do?
- The same people who are always involved in community development are exhausted. Bringing new people into the discussion about the community is helpful.
- Talking/planning needs to move to action quite quickly. Conversely, it is important to make sure that everyone understands the issues at hand. There needs to be a balance of talking and acting.
- The way that funding is provided from government and many other granting bodies does not support place-based approaches.

### **Observations about the issue of LES in the context of place-based planning:**

- People don’t understand LES until they see how it meets their immediate needs. They want to know about how improving LES will help them in the short term.
- It is important to include and talk directly with people who have LES needs or requirements related to living in the community.

## CONCLUSION

As rural Canada continues to undergo significant demographic challenges and economic restructuring, the future sustainability of many rural communities may be in question. Over the past 50 years, the combination of low fertility rates, out-migration of youth, as well as the inability to attract immigrants has led to significant population decline in rural Canada. Many rural communities in Canada are reaching a tipping point where they will not be able to sustain basic levels of services and facilities that are needed to foster vibrant communities. Growing populations and a strong local economy go hand in hand; without working-age populations, businesses and local services cannot be supported, and without businesses and local services, residents cannot be kept or attracted.

Rural communities in Canada face a unique set of challenges. Yet, they are each unique in their ability to address these challenges. Consequently, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work to assist them. There are no simple policy solutions for strengthening rural communities; locally crafted place-based strategies that can align to the contexts and capacity of rural communities may offer some promise. Place-based approaches could offer a relevant methodological framework that can be designed and adapted to appropriately harness the unique assets, socioeconomic conditions and identities of specific rural communities and regions.

In particular, place-based approaches can provide a useful infrastructure of support for the widespread development of literacy and essential skills. That infrastructure would allow for more cohesive theory of change methodologies, collective impact evaluations, long term data collection, ongoing formative and summative evaluations and evidence-based decision making.

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