Strengthening Community-Led Innovation

Innovation dramatically alters the established environment in which industry operates. Although innovation may not specifically change the work that is done, it does create a new range of opportunities for the practice of Community Economic Development (CED). Through innovation, communities and organizations can become more effective and efficient. For groups practicing CED in Canada, innovation is something to be celebrated and shared. When we share innovation, we all profit.

During the week of September 23 - 27, 2002, over 400 members of various CED organizations across Canada met in Winnipeg, Manitoba to share innovative ideas and experiences. The sharing of innovation will strengthen CED throughout this country. The CED conference also demonstrated that despite the growing success of CED in Canada, we can all improve by learning from one another.

Summary
With a proud past and a vision to face the new millennium, the National CED Conference welcomed delegates from all corners of the nation, providing a unique opportunity to discuss pressing issues including:
- Rural Initiatives
- Business Development
- Social Development
- Development Corporations
- Financial Strategies
- Housing Initiatives

Evening entertainment

- Initiatives for Marginalized Communities Within these issues, the knowledge can be regarded in the context of both general themes and specific success stories. While recognizing past successes, it is also constructive to recognize the potential for future action through building capacity to implement innovative practices. We must also strive to develop policies and approaches to guide support for Canadian CED. Established organizations such as CCEDNet and CEDTAP will play a key role in advancing CED in Canada. The dialogues held at the conference allowed participants to celebrate successes and to explore the potential that the future holds.

We embraced possibilities of creating visions and dreams, enhancing our knowledge and invigorating our spirits to the task of building better communities not only for us but also for generations to come.

Speaker during one of the workshops

Central Concepts

Fundamental themes surfaced amid the workshop discussions that can guide the practice of CED across Canada. Implementing CED initiatives in any community should begin with the following considerations:

- CED and innovation have a reciprocal relationship. CED leads to innovation and innovation affects the structure, impact, and practice of CED.
- CED is a holistic and participatory process involving many players within the community.
- CED organizations need to work with the community to establish trust and mentorship with its citizens.
- Relationships among CED organizations and the community they serve need to be strengthened. Marginalized groups within society are often faced with barriers preventing employment and social mobility.
- CED must provide effective alternatives to conventional methods since marginalized communities face a set of challenges that is not addressed by conventional methods.
- CED organizations need to focus on their social agendas. Articulating specific organizational agendas will help to solidify the overall CED movement.
- CED needs government support without government interference. Too often government funding comes with restrictive conditions. Government support should thus be improved at the policy level in order for programs to achieve greater success.

Meeting at Mondragon

- Education at the local and national level is a critical part of CED. As more CED courses are offered, the presence and significance of CED is strengthened in the public eye. Creating heightened awareness and recognition at the national level will benefit individual communities as they implement CED.

Community Led Innovations

Conference participants eagerly shared CED anecdotes from their personal experience. From local to international initiatives, we were inspired by the endless ways that CED can successfully be applied. Some of the examples contributed by participants included:

- Asset building and Individual Deposits Accounts: Helping low-income individuals gain assets and income, since many are excluded from financial institutions. LearNsave focuses on saving for education and training and contributes $3 for every $1 deposited.
- Women and Economic Development Consortium: Providing grants and technical assistance to increase the capacity of women's organizations and to empower low-income women in the Canadian economy.

- Toronto Homeless CED (THCED): Funding business enterprises designed and operated by homeless people.
- SEED Winnipeg: Empowering the community while providing income assistance to those in need. SEED aims to help low-income groups establish economically viable enterprise through loans and training programs.
- Co-operative housing: Using 30% forgivable loans to offer low-income individuals greater access to adequate housing in Saskatoon. Quint Development Corporation leverages the down payment for homes (25% province + 5% city = 30% forgivable loan). The remaining 70% mortgage financing is provided by the Credit Union. Down payment loans are forgiven after 5 years and land titles are transferred, giving families 30% equity at the end of the term.

Dinner at Le Rendez-vous

- Eco-Trust Canada: Promoting environmental sustainability through strategic partnerships with underprivileged groups that derive income from natural resources.
- Community Credit: Providing loans to improve the lives of financially marginalized individuals.
- Learning Enrichment Foundation: Lending training, rather than money, to enhance the skills individuals bring to the workforce.
- Local Investment Towards Employment (LITE): Creating an employment reallocation system centred on local investment and growth in Winnipeg's inner city.
- Electronic Lampposts: Establishing a database for Downtown East Side Vancouver residents to learn about available neighbourhood services.
- Revising the conventional approach to CED in the inner city, so that its residents are no longer a source of cheap labour in dead end jobs.
- Trent Centre for Community Education: Completing CED research and development for Peterborough community to earn university credit. Students develop innovative projects through a focus on rural and urban environments, Aboriginal issues and much more.
- Youth leadership in CED: Developing community youth programs to gain skills and training and to involve youth in economic and social development projects in their communities. Such programs are vital means to provide youth with the confidence to be involved in their communities.
- Co-operative movement in Inuit Villages in Quebec: Pooling resources to sell Inuit crafts in Montreal. The group ultimately opened an exclusively Inuit craft store. The same co-op concept was extended to purchase gasoline to stabilize prices among villages.
- Community corner store: Attempting to break the corner store credit cycle by creating low- or non-profit stores. Also providing bulk purchase prices on non-bulk purchases.
- AIROS: Linking Aboriginal communities across the country by offering radio programming addressing local and national issues. Also available on-line to reach urban Aboriginals.

Building Capacity for Innovation
Communities often face complex challenges and require creative solutions that are feasible even with limited resources. For this reason, the success of CED is directly related to the ability of the community to develop and incorporate innovative practices. Participants identified key aspects of capacity building towards innovation:
- Identifying short term as well as long term goals.
- Incorporating creative ideas to collaborate and forge partnerships with businesses, government

agencies, and the community.

- Developing the socio-economic capacity of each individual member of the community contributes to a healthy community. Discovering new skills empowers each individual and allows them to be active and effective members of the community.
- Creating training programs to combine traditional and new skills toward the development of micro-enterprises in the community.
- Developing community loan funds as an answer to the lack of credit from conventional lending institutions.
- Embracing the concept of charitable status to benefit from tax incentives. Obtaining the status of a charitable organization can also enhance the credibility of community organizations in front of the business community.
- Looking to the future. Elder care, environmental technologies, and emerging co-operatives represent opportunities for innovative solutions by the CED community.

Policies and Approaches
While discussing the benefits of applying CED to particular contexts, it is also valuable to discuss the opportunities associated with CED. The conference provided a forum to discuss potential avenues for CED policies and approaches in the future, such as:

- Creating a new and clear definition of CED, in plain common language understood by all.
- Recognizing the capacity and potential of self-determination within each community.
- Making policies all inclusive and participatory with greater focus on the children and youth in the community.
- Forming research and advisory teams to facilitate accessibility and community participation. Consider creating joint ventures with local planners to forecast outcomes of CED projects.
- Being proactive when concerns are identified in the community, without waiting for the government to take action.

Dancing at Le Rendez-vous

- Accepting that each community is unique and there are no "one size fits all" solutions to the array of challenges faced by communities. Approaches that are successful in one community may not be feasible elsewhere.
- Recognizing that French Canadian communities face the same concerns as Anglophone communities. It is necessary to maintain and promote bi-lateral conversations between the two communities to enhance mutual respect, understanding and awareness of each community's unique needs and characteristics.

- Developing the capacity for CED in Aboriginal and Rural communities
- Creating a trustworthy and supportive environment in which to promote our success stories.

CCEDNet and CEDTAP Support
In addition to identifying goals for the CED movement, participants identified a number of goals for the hosting organizations including:

- To improve and extend the network of communities by establishing a more effective dialogue between non-governmental organizations, government agencies, private sector, academic sectors, and community members.
- To develop professional standards and educational guidelines for all members of CED.
- To be the voice of the community. To promote clarity and understanding of simple issues such

as, "What is poverty and what are its consequences?"

- To build coalitions to generate a strong lobby movement.
- To develop a policy guide as well as rational and understandable progress indicators for programs across the country.
- To combine programs with similar objectives and reduce duplication of services.
- To create global awareness within communities and to be a member of the global village.
- Education is an important component of CED. Creating a common language among organizations and greater public awareness would allow CED to become part of the mainstream.
- To increase the degree of networking among CED organizations, by creating a national database to encourage collaboration among organizations and facilitate an effective dialogue with government, non-governmental organizations, and private sectors.
- To introduce individual learning thereby empowering individuals and better supporting smaller organizations.

The energizing week of workshops came to a close on September 27. We returned to our communities with renewed energy, knowing that we can play a vital role in the journey to improving our communities together. We are not facing challenges with an overwhelming sense of isolation. We are not alone. We are in the biggest room of the universe, the room for improvement.

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