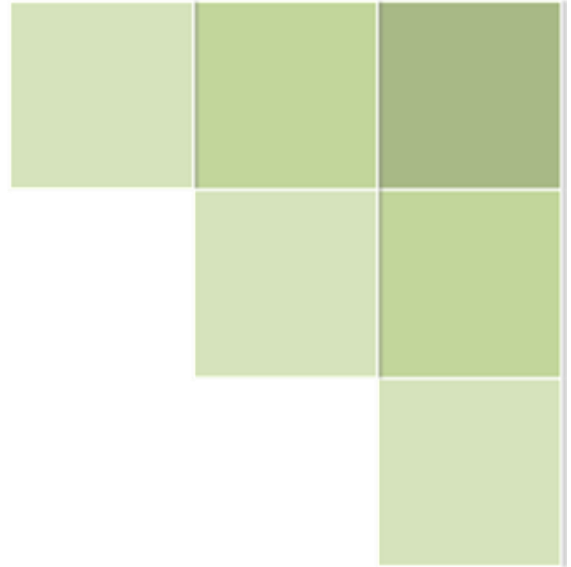


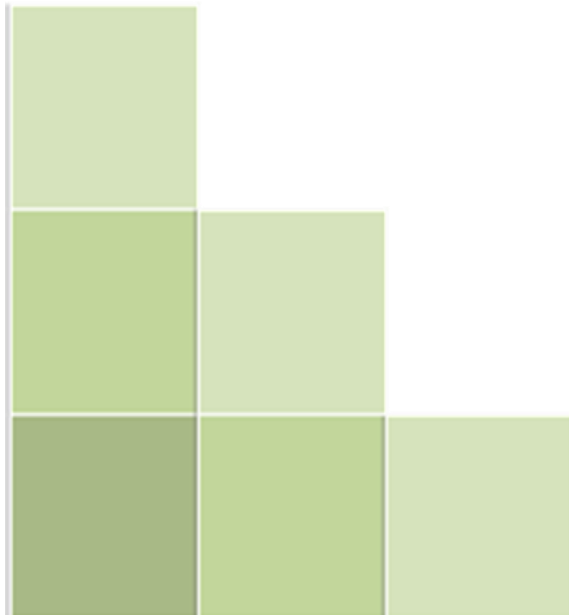
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Voluntary Health and Social Service Sector

Roles and Readiness for Community Transformation

Williams Lake



Prepared for the UNBC Office of Research

By the Community Development Institute
University of Northern British Columbia

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Accessing This Report

The reports from this project may be accessed through the Community Development Institute's website at: <http://www.unbc.ca/community-development-institute/research-projects>.

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, resource-dependent communities have become more susceptible to rapid fluctuations in commodity demand, to industry slowdowns that last longer, and to periods of active operation that are shorter than they were historically (Markey et al. 2012). In addition, climate change is impacting forest health and agricultural ecologies. Declining populations in these communities, coupled with changes to government policy, away from a Keynesian model towards a neo-liberal approach, have resulted in the withdrawal of many core health and social service delivery functions (Ryser and Halseth, 2014). Altogether, these communities face rapid and significant transformation at a time when they have fewer resources to cope with these changes.

The voluntary health and social service sector (non-profit community-based health and social service agencies) stepped in to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of government services. These organizations face many challenges when taking on these functions, including: lack of role clarity, lack of recognition of voluntary ‘expertise’ and experience, insufficient support for training and development, inadequate funding for staffing and administration, lack of funder responsiveness to community or economic crises, volunteer burn-out and departure, and barriers to information-sharing and case planning (Hanlon et al., 2011). These challenges impact the effectiveness of voluntary organizations and their ability to help support communities under stress.

Many of the forestry-based communities within UNBC’s service area are experiencing the issues outlined above. Furthermore, they are on the cusp of an additional transformation due to the end of the ‘salvage’ harvest of wood killed by the Mountain Pine Beetle. In all likelihood, this will lead to significant job losses and create an escalating demand for, and stress on, voluntary health and social services.

To explore issues and challenges faced by the voluntary health and social service sector in the context of readiness for significant community transition, this project aims to better understand how the sector can build capacity and resilience so that it is more equipped to support communities in transition. As well, the project will identify supports that are needed from funders and government. We hope that the lessons learned from this research will be helpful to communities in transition, whether in an upswing or downturn.

We conducted research in two communities in northern British Columbia, Quesnel and Williams Lake, and the discussions mostly focused on the anticipated effects of the reduction in allowable timber harvest rates (Allowable Annual Cut).



Methodology

This research used a participatory action approach to explore the voluntary health and social service sector's readiness for community transition. Participatory action approaches provide an opportunity for the sector to develop strategies for moving forward.

This research project involved discussions and focus groups with voluntary health and social service organizations, followed by a workshop in each community to review the findings. The project culminated in a final report for both Quesnel and Williams Lake.

Research Ethics

The University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) Research Ethics Board (REB) reviews all research conducted by the Community Development Institute. The REB granted permission to conduct the research in the summer of 2015. Upon agreeing to take part in the project, each participant signed a consent form, which outlined the purpose of the study and stated that their participation was voluntary and that their identities would remain anonymous. During the focus groups and workshops, participants were asked to respect the privacy of fellow contributors.

Discussions with Sector Staff

The participants in this research project consisted of board members for various voluntary health and social service sector organizations, their senior staff, front-line staff, and representatives from a number of local Aboriginal groups. We recruited each participant by email or phone. The Local Advisory Committee member who assisted the CDI for this project provided the participants' contact information, although we also obtained public records and referrals from other community members.

The goal of the discussions was to build an understanding of the sector's readiness for change. Two focus groups were held in each community, with a total of eleven Quesnel residents and eighteen Williams Lake residents. We also conducted phone interviews with one additional resident from each community. During the focus groups, we asked participants to identify organizations' roles and strengths, as well as supports that could assist the sector to prepare for change.

Participants who attended the focus groups were also invited to attend a workshop in their community. Three participants in Quesnel and ten participants in Williams Lake attended the respective workshops.

Focus Group Questions

The focus groups centered on four main questions related to the forestry downturn:

- 1) How aware do you think the community is about this situation?
- 2) How aware has your organization been of forthcoming change? Have you done any discussion/planning to prepare?
- 3) What do you think the voluntary and social service sector might expect?
- 4) What does the sector need to do to prepare?
 - a. Capacity – staffing, funding, volunteerism
 - b. Advocacy – getting social and voluntary issues to decision makers
 - c. Collaboration and partnerships (in sector)
 - i. Linkages and referrals
 - ii. Sector mapping – identify gaps and overlaps
 - d. Collaboration and partnerships with other sectors (e.g. economic sector)

We asked participants to try to respond from the perspective of their particular occupation or organizational involvement but we also asked them to include their personal reflections as a citizen of north-central BC.

Workshop Questions

After the focus groups, the CDI conducted a workshop in each community where we shared our preliminary findings. Participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the identified themes and to add additional input where desired. We incorporated their comments into this report. The workshop ended with a facilitated discussion to encourage participants to develop strategies that can enhance their collective readiness for change.

During the workshop, we asked the participants the following questions:

- 1) Which of the key themes resonate with you? Which themes do not?
 - a. Do you have anything to add to these findings?
 - b. Is there anything that does not seem to reflect the discussion in the focus group?
- 2) What needs to be done to prepare for the anticipated community/economic transformation?
- 3) What are the priorities?
- 4) What are the next steps?
- 5) Who needs to be involved in the next steps?

Analysis

All focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. From the transcriptions, we compiled participants' responses into summaries and then identified common themes using a qualitative content analysis. When we presented the preliminary findings back to the participants, they made a number of observations and innovative suggestions. The following section outlines the main themes that emerged.



Main Themes

Participants' responses revealed three overarching themes that were common to both communities: Community Readiness, Impacts on Social Services, and Economic Diversity.

Community Readiness

The first theme, Community Readiness, connects to three sub-themes: Awareness, Community Response, and Community Preparation.

Awareness

Many participants discussed how people living in rural areas can have trouble accessing the resources the voluntary health and social services sector provides, especially when they are out of work. They tend to think they must 'jump through hoops' in order to get help, which stems from a general lack of awareness about the sector. Participants felt that information on how to cope with change would be beneficial and that services could be advertised more effectively.

Economically, participants sensed that community members are somewhat aware of emerging challenges facing the forest industry. They felt that executive staff working in the industry have a better understanding than most community members. Although the community experienced downsizing and closures before, it was able to weather the problems until industry recovered. Participants were surprised to hear that this downturn may last 50-70 years. Throughout the interviews and workshops, there was a strong feeling that information about the degree and length of the upcoming downturn needs to be more widely understood within the community, and that it should be translated into multiple languages and made available to Aboriginal groups.

Community Response

Participants indicated that community members are concerned about the future of the economy. They feared that rumours surrounding the forest industry could impact the community's ability to attract and retain residents. Residents and service providers seem unwilling to act until they have more certainty. Once the challenges are better understood, participants worried it will be too late, which places them in a reactionary position.

Though these problems were recognized, another message emerged from the discussions. Participants felt assured that the community would pull through and that low housing costs would attract new residents. There was a sense that unemployed residents might enter new fields such as education and health care in order to stay in the community. Participants noted how Aboriginal organizations have been working to train people for many skilled-labour jobs that might become available; however, there are limited positions within these fields.

Times of economic crisis are often accompanied by an increase in violence, homelessness, and divorce. Participants explained how it can be difficult to provide services to people facing multiple barriers (such as addiction, mental illness, abuse, and violence) who access numerous organizations at the same time. These challenges are compounded when there is a housing shortage because landlords can be more selective and often exclude those most in need.

Community Preparation

Through the focus groups, it was learned that both residents and health and social service organizations within the community live paycheque-to-paycheque, causing insecurity towards being able to mitigate economic change. Participants understood that planning for the future is important, but felt that it is difficult to know for sure what problems to expect without evidence. The 2014 breach of the Mount Polley Mine tailings pond, followed by its immediate closure, was seen by many as a 'practice run' for the expected economic downturn. It gave

insight into the community's needs and highlighted the necessity for a long term (five- to ten-year) plan.

Participants felt that government needs to be made aware of the large amount of time voluntary health and social service organizations spend writing grant applications and proposals. It is difficult to prepare for upcoming economic downturns when organizations are struggling economically every day. Ideally, the time spent applying for grants could be better spent planning projects and streamlining work processes. Participants stated that the importance of investing in people and the social services must be recognized. For their part, they suggested that social service organizations need to be more inclusive of Aboriginal groups and need to understand that prevention is cheaper than intervention. A proactive approach will be most successful in providing services to the community.

Finally, participants stated overwhelmingly that community members need more information on the changes facing Williams Lake and the forest industry. They pointed out that the Cariboo-Chilcotin Beetle Action Coalition conducted extensive research into the impacts that the Mountain Pine Beetle could have on communities. Their findings are a valuable resource that should be made more accessible to help the community prepare for future change.

Impacts on Social Services

The second theme, Impacts on Social Services, can be divided into five sub-themes: Social Service Coordination, Funding Levels, Volunteers, Fundraising, and Staff Recruitment.

Social Service Coordination

Participants noted that as the economic downturn progresses, there will be a greater need for coordination between voluntary health and social service organizations. Strong working partnerships will reduce duplication of work and make organizations better able to direct clients. Whether through advertisements or simply word of mouth, participants mentioned that the community needs more awareness of services available in the community.

To better coordinate services, participants suggested inviting all service providers to a communal table, such as the Social Planning Council. Participants emphasized that the Social Planning Council needs to work more with the community to ensure that smaller councils are included in the conversation. This will ensure that all organizations are on the same page and perhaps even create a space for collaboration on jointly-funded projects.

Funding Levels

People felt strongly that voluntary health and social service providers are constantly being asked to do more with less. For many services providers, funding is awarded on a yearly basis, which greatly limits their ability to plan for the future or to start new programs. In addition, governments and local sponsors fund some organizations on a per-client-served basis, meaning they would lose funding if an economic downturn caused residents to move away from Williams Lake. This in turn will result in a reduction of services at a time when more services are needed.

Participants also explained how funding applications have strict guidelines which oftentimes make health and social service organizations ineligible to apply. Because organizations perpetually lack funding, they experience difficulties setting benchmarks and assessing how much funding they require. Grants tend to operate on a yearly basis so it is difficult to gauge the long-term success of particular projects and programming. Lastly, participants felt that support tends to diminish when it is needed most –during economic downturns– and that the first positions to be cut are those of people working on the ground to improve the situation.

Volunteers

Participants reported that voluntary health and social service organizations have difficulty recruiting volunteers in Williams Lake and feel as though they are competing with one another for volunteers. Firstly, volunteers are aging and few younger residents are coming forward to replace them. Participants attributed this to a lack of civic duty and a lack of free time to help others. Secondly, many services have long applications that require computer proficiency and require applicants to obtain a separate criminal record check for each service they support. Lastly, participants suggested that more residents might volunteer if they knew which roles were vacant.

In terms of volunteer retention, participants discussed some of the factors that contribute to the loss of volunteers. Burnout was identified as a major concern, causing volunteers to switch organizations or take leaves from their roles. An economic downturn would likely exacerbate this issue, as funding cuts would result in volunteers taking on duties that were previously performed by staff. At the same time, increasing issues of liability limit the activities volunteers can undertake; they often direct clients to information instead of work with them personally. Participants asserted that organizations could increase volunteer retention by allowing them to learn new tasks and take on new responsibilities.

Fundraising

Many social service organizations rely on fundraising to operate, but participants noted how fundraising attempts often yield lower proceeds during an economic downturn. Strong relationships with the business community often provide excellent connections for fundraising, as businesses frequently make in-kind donations or allow fundraising products to be sold in their stores. During economic downturns, though, participants explained how businesses feel “tapped out,” making it more difficult to secure sponsorships. As a result, health and social service organizations have to change their fundraising methods, which further limits their capacity to offer services to the community.

Staff Recruitment

Similar to volunteer recruitment, participants observed that staff recruitment in northern communities is a pervasive challenge. Voluntary health and social service organizations experience high turnover rates, due mostly to burnout caused by employees overextending themselves. Participants felt that recruitment would be easier if residents were more familiar with the service organizations in their community. The best recruiters are those with knowledge of the community because they are able to discern good fits between staff, volunteers, and organizations.

Economic Diversity

The third theme, Economic Diversity, can be divided into two sub-themes: Primary Industries and Secondary Industries.

Primary Industries

Throughout the interviews and workshops, participants felt that residents in the community continue to believe that an economy focused on a single resource is the best way for the community to prosper. Given the forthcoming decline in the forest industry, residents seemed hopeful that new largescale projects like mines or wood processing plants will open, thereby offsetting the prospect of an economic downturn.

Participants explained how many residents believe changes to the forest industry will be gradual and there will not be a drastic drop in activity or employment. They mentioned how the ways in which most residents respond to industry layoffs demonstrate their conviction that a single industry can support the community. For example, layoffs are often followed by a combined two years of severance pay and employment insurance benefits, so residents attempt to wait out the downturn and believe that the industry will recover or be replaced. According to participants, employment is available in other sectors, but compensation in these fields is low. In this sense, there is no urgent need to shift focus towards new ways to diversify.

Secondary Industries

As much as residents of Williams Lake are shaped by the community's close connection to the forest industry, participants also underscored the importance of economic diversity. Secondary industries can also provide well-paying jobs to residents. During the interviews and workshops, participants suggested tourism might be an area to focus on, but they also worried that it is unrealistic for tourism to be sufficiently profitable so as to support the community.

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Some examples of tourism-related businesses that participants thought might help diversify the community's economy were arts, cultural diversity, and heritage. Mostly, though, participants stressed that a new "out of the box" means of diversification needs to be found. There has been a lot of conversation around the need for change in the community, but there has been little action. Participants sense that the community has no clear strategy for economic diversification.



Action Items

Throughout the interviews, the focus groups, and the workshops, the following action items emerged:

Community Readiness

- Build awareness in the community with regards to available services.
- Educate the community about upcoming economic changes in a way that allows residents to prepare for and minimize panic.
- Ensure that information is available in multiple languages and to Aboriginal groups.
- Make use of the extensive research completed by the Cariboo-Chilcotin Beetle Action Coalition about the impact that the Mountain Pine Beetle could have on communities.
- Remind governments of the importance of investing in people and health and social service organizations.

Impacts on Social Services

- Establish strong working partnerships between service providers to increase the potential for collaboration on jointly funded projects, limit duplication of work, and enhance the ability to direct clients to appropriate resources.
- Increase inclusivity in the Social Planning Council to ensure all parties are invited to the table, including Aboriginal groups.
- Funders can offer grants with flexible criteria and for multi-year projects and programs.
- Streamline the volunteer application process, reducing redundancies where possible.
- Increase retention by supporting volunteers while they learn new tasks or take on new responsibilities.
- Explore new fundraising options.

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- Encourage healthy work-life balance among staff in order to prevent burnout and decrease turnover.
- Employ recruiters with knowledge of the community so they can connect residents to organizations that fit their skills and preferences.

Economic Diversity

- Explore ways to channel residents' hope for the community into action rather than inaction.
- Publicize job vacancies and encourage laid-off workers to pursue these options.
- Create an economic environment that values innovation and entrepreneurship.
- Build and maintain programs and opportunities that will attract people to the community, while providing more jobs.
- Explore options for economic diversification, including tourism.



Conclusion

Since the province embraced a neo-liberal model of governance in the 1980s, the pace and extent to which resource communities like Williams Lake and Quesnel experience economic change has intensified. The goal of this study was to examine the voluntary health and social service sector's readiness for change, given that the forest industry is expecting a downturn and that both Williams Lake and Quesnel are intricately connected to this industry.

Through interviews, focus groups, and a workshop in each community, we invited staff from various voluntary health and social services organizations to discuss what they felt are the main issues and challenges that they experience working in resource-based communities. We also asked them to identify further supports that could help them better prepare for economic change.

The conversations in Williams Lake left a strong impression that the community was accustomed to boom and bust cycles and understood its effects on the community. Nonetheless, the recent breach of the Mount Polley tailings pond, followed by the mine's immediate closure, reminded the community that the resource industry is volatile and that it is important to prepare for change.

Participants highlighted three main themes with regards to their organization's resilience in the face of economic change: Community Readiness, Impacts on Social Services, and Economic Diversity. Although participants felt generally aware of Williams Lake's dependence on the forest industry, and most agreed that economic diversification is important, the voluntary health and social service sector does not currently have the capacity to meaningfully address these challenges. By and large, organizations focus most of their energy on staying afloat on a day-to-day basis.

Participants explained that there is limited funding available to the sector, which causes organizations to find themselves competing with each other when they prefer to be collaborating. Although participants wished they could take more time to prepare for economic change, the very real possibility that their organizations might close at any time due to inconsistent funding distracts from the ability to plan ahead. This insecurity amplifies the effects of economic downturns because many residents make more use of the voluntary health and social services sector during challenging times.

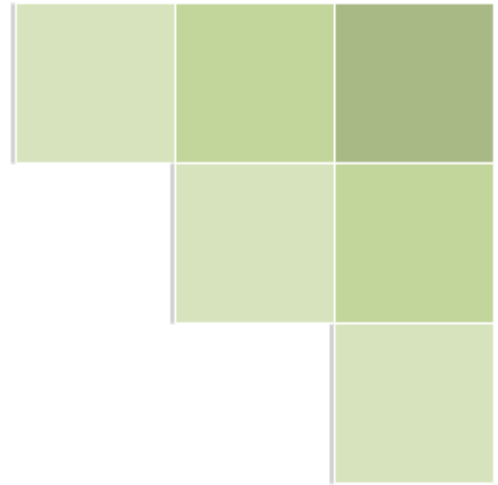
As a result of these discussions, we highlighted a number of “action items” that communities and voluntary health and social service organizations can consider in order to increase resilience and readiness for the upcoming forestry downturn. Most importantly, communities need more awareness with regards to resource economies, funders can develop multi-year grants for the voluntary health and social service sector, and communities should better promote innovation and entrepreneurship. These starting points will hopefully trigger new attitudes with regards to Williams Lake’s long-standing history as a resource-based community.

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The Community Development Institute at the University of Northern British Columbia

The Community Development Institute (CDI) at UNBC was established in 2004 with a broad mandate in the areas of community, regional, and economic development. Since its inception, the CDI has worked with communities across the northern and central regions of British Columbia to develop and implement strategies for economic diversification and community resilience.

Dedicated to understanding and realizing the potential of BC's non-metropolitan communities in a changing global economy, the CDI works to prepare students and practitioners for leadership roles in community and economic development, and create a body of knowledge, information, and research that will enhance our understanding and our ability to anticipate, and develop strategies for, ongoing transformation. The CDI is committed to working with all communities – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – to help them further their community and regional development aspirations.

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