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Introduction

Communities throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, and elsewhere in Canada, struggle with the question of ‘why think regionally?’. Historically, communities have conducted formal municipal activities and planning independent of neighbouring communities. Over the years, many communities have achieved success in this approach, while other communities have not. Previous rural development strategies focused on ‘smoke stack chasing’, which created competition with neighbouring communities and involved expensive incentives to companies. Rural, resource-dependent regions around the world have faced extensive social, economic, environmental and political restructuring in recent decades, driven by factors such as urbanization and declining birth rates, technological change, increased reliance on the service and information economy globalization, government retrenchment, climate change, resource depletion. This restructuring has contributed to the need for rural communities to thinking regionally about their futures. In the fall of 2009, the Burin Peninsula Regional Council of the Rural Secretariat, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador partnered with the Department of Geography, Memorial University to explore opportunities and challenges to collaboration in the Burin Peninsula. From December 2009 to February 2010 interviews were conducted with residents of the Burin Peninsula to discuss previous and current illustrations of regional collaboration, barriers to collaboration, opportunities for economic development, and the future of the region. This poster provides an overview of the Burin Peninsula, challenges to regional collaboration identified by residents, and seven critical factors required for future successful regional collaboration initiatives.

The Burin Peninsula

The Burin Peninsula Rural Secretariat region consists of the area circled on the map. The region encompasses the entire peninsula. Throughout this poster the Burin Peninsula Rural Secretariat Region will be referred to as the Burin Peninsula.

The population of the Burin Peninsula, 21,600 according to the 2006 Statistics Canada Census, is decreasing (Statistics Canada, 2006). Since 1991, the region has experienced a negative total net migration, resulting in population loss (Rural Secretariat, 2007). From 2001-2006, the population of the Burin Peninsula decreased by 8.9% or 2,100 people. As a province, Newfoundland and Labrador experienced a population decrease of 1.5% during the same period.

The economy of the Burin Peninsula is diverse yet characterized by four main sectors: manufacturing, fishing, health and social services, and retail trade (Human Resources, Labour and Employment, 2007). These four sectors comprise 57% of the workers in the region. The Burin Peninsula’s economy was built upon the fishery, not dissimilar to other regions of Newfoundland (Burin Peninsula Regional Council, 2009). Grady and Kapsalis (2002) noted the Burin Peninsula region has a seasonal unemployment rate of up to 26%.

Methodology

Information for this project was collected through three sources: interviews with community residents, focused dialogue sessions, and existing reports, documents, and literature. The Burin Peninsula Regional Council identified community residents and leaders with diverse knowledge and experiences of the region. In brainstorming individuals, the Council strived to include geographic representation from all areas of the Burin Peninsula, businesses, volunteer organizations, and youth. Invitations to participate in an interview were circulated by email to each of the 21 individuals identified. Responses from the individuals selected were positive and 16 interviews were conducted from December 2009 to February 2010. Interviews were a semi-structured series of open-ended questions exploring illustrations of collaboration, barriers to collaboration, economic development opportunities, and the future of the Burin Peninsula. Interviews ranged from 45 – 120 minutes in duration, with an approximate average of 60 minutes.

Two focused dialogues were held with members of the Burin Peninsula Regional Council. Each session provided an opportunity to validate initial findings and brainstorm additional barriers to collaboration, economic development opportunities, and the future of the Burin Peninsula. Additional perspectives on the Burin Peninsula were collected from reviewing publically available reports. Reports were reviewed that had been created for organizations such as Human Resources, Labour and Employment, the Rural Secretariat, Schooner Regional Development Corporation, and Statistics Canada.

Challenges to Collaboration

In discussions with residents of the Burin Peninsula a number of barriers impeding collaboration were identified. All of these barriers have been grouped into six broad categories: financial, geographical and transportation, knowledge of collaboration and generational, relationship, and human resources.

Financial Barriers

- The most frequently mentioned financial barrier to regional collaboration was competition for limited resources and the notion collaboration will dilute limited financial resources. This perception was noted as a contributing factor for a number of activities not moving forward in the region.
- Very few organizations are able to cover financial expenses for volunteers to attend meetings in the Burin Peninsula. Expenses related to participating in regional initiatives serves as a barrier.
- Volunteer and community organizations have a heavy reliance on government job creation programs for staff funding which does not provide stability for staff or organizations. In addition, participants expressed a concern that current funding opportunities do not always match local priorities. The reliance on project funding necessitates that organizations apply for funding in non-priority areas to ensure a source of funding to operate. This often places priorities on the ‘back burner’ until appropriate funding is available.



Geographical and Transportation Barriers

- The physical geography of the Burin Peninsula was expressed as a significant barrier to regional collaboration as the distance between communities can prevent face-to-face meetings. Further to physical distance, weather was cited as a barrier often preventing transportation in the winter.
- Many members of the region, especially seniors, elect not to travel at night on the highways. This hampers the ability for face-to-face meetings among boards and volunteers.
- The lack of regularly scheduled public transportation between communities of the Burin Peninsula was identified as a barrier. Participants noted existing charter services to St. John’s and from Grand Bank/ Fortune to the College of the North Atlantic campus. The lack of public transportation between Burin Peninsula communities creates two hindrances. First, it can hinder the ability for groups to meet. Second, and more important to one participant, the lack of public transportation does not permit relationships to develop between communities and their residents. “If you do not travel to other communities you are less likely to build relationships and understand common opportunities and challenges.”
- Prior to the highway, physical isolation was the largest barrier to collaboration. People did not know each other.

Knowledge of Collaboration and Generational Barriers

- There is a lack of understanding of how cooperation and collaboration can benefit the entire region. In some instances, participants explained there can sometimes be a fear of collaboration as the “rules of engagement are either different, flexible, or undetermined”.
- Community residents are concerned cooperation and collaboration will lead to amalgamation or a loss of autonomy.
- Many youth in the region view cooperation as natural and required for the region; in contrast, there are some in the older generation who view the need to “protect their community’s turf”. This polarization of creates tensions among youth/young adults and ‘older generations’.

Relationship Barriers

- To build regional initiatives time is required to develop relationships and trust. There are few funding opportunities to support this relationship building process.
- There is a need to ensure respect exists between all communities of the Burin Peninsula. “We have to respect every community and what they have to offer. It does not matter if you are a community of 7,000 or a community of 500. There is an opportunity for all communities to contribute”
- Individual personalities can interfere with regional initiatives in the Burin Peninsula.
- Municipal leaders are elected to serve and “defend their community’s interest”. This attitude serves as a barrier to cooperation in the region.
- Rivalries between communities in the Burin Peninsula hamper regional initiatives.
- It can be difficult sometimes for community residents to see developments in neighbouring communities as good for the region. Too often new developments in neighbouring communities are viewed negatively.

Human Resources

- Many regional organizations and initiatives are lead by volunteers. Most participants indicated a concern of volunteer burn out in the Burin Peninsula. Not only do regional organizations require volunteers, regional collaboration initiatives require representatives from existing volunteer organizations that may place increased stress on volunteers.
- A large number of volunteer organizations exist in the Burin Peninsula – estimated at over 300, although some may be inactive. Finding volunteers for each of these organizations was noted as a challenge by interview participants.
- As young community residents depart the region there is less potential for new volunteers.

Factors Required for Successful Regional Collaboration

From the challenges inhibiting regional collaboration identified by community residents seven critical factors for moving forward were identified. Each of these factors was noted as being necessary for any future successful regional collaboration initiatives.

1. **Collective regional buy-in** for a regional collaboration approach. This requires residents to clearly understand the purpose, benefits, and risks of collaboration. Communities need to have a desire and a capacity to undertake regional initiatives.
2. **Multi-sector engagement** in the regional development process. This process needs to ensure community residents, community-serving organizations, volunteer/non-profit organizations, government departments, and private sector are actively engaged.
3. Need for local, regional, provincial, and federal **policy supportive of regional development** process and initiatives.
4. The need for **capacity building and skill development opportunities** for all stakeholders.
5. New regional development models and initiatives require **funding**. Process funding, or funding to support building trust and offsetting costs of meeting participation, is especially critical.
6. Regional stakeholders need to be **innovative**, open to change, and think ‘outside the box’ to ensure regional development models meet locally established priorities.
7. The need for strategies to identify and address **potential or perceived overlap of organizations’ mandates** and any new regional development model.

Moving Forward & Next Steps

The outcomes of this university-community research project were presented to the Burin Peninsula Regional Council of the Rural Secretariat. The Regional Council has committed to two actions based on the findings. First, the Regional Council included information from this project in their annual advice submission to the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. Second, multiple participants indicated a need for a forum for regional discussions that could serve to build relationships among community residents, organizations, and associations of the region. In 2011, the Burin Peninsula Regional Council of the Rural Secretariat will embark on a citizens forum to discuss future regional collaboration opportunities.

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