UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY: *Planning, Research and Methodology*

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Sean Markey, Kelly Vodden, Stephen Ameyaw, John Pierce and Mark Roseland

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Gathering Strength, Delgamuukw, and a tripartite review of the British Columbia Treaty Process a great deal of interest has arisen in the concept of "capacity" in Aboriginal communities. Panels have been formed, policies and programs announced and significant dollars invested. But do we know exactly what capacity really means? Is it financial? Is it ecological? Organizational? Human? How can we determine what kinds of capacity are really needed to build stronger, self-reliant communities? And how can communities lead the process of identifying and building their own local capacity?

This paper seeks to answer, in part, the above questions by describing methods used in community capacity assessment for sustainable community economic development (CED). In particular we will be presenting the framework adopted by a three year research initiative being conducted by the Community Economic Development Centre (CEDC) at Simon Fraser University, entitled "Promoting CED for Forest-based Communities." The project examines the process of CED, including capacity assessment, within the rural setting of four British Columbia forest-dependent communities: The Nuxalk Nation, Bella Coola; The Upper St'at'imc Nation, Lillooet; Salmon Arm; and, 100 Mile House, South Cariboo.

The paper begins by reviewing key terms and describing an overall development process used to facilitate CED. The importance of the capacity assessment components of this development process are then discussed before describing a variety of methods for assessing community capacity. Next, an example of how capacity assessment was applied in the CED Centre project is described. Finally, analysis and conclusions about the process of community capacity assessment, drawn from our experiences, are provided.

Definitions of Key Terms

Two key terms, which have a variety of meanings and uses, dominate the discussion below, "community economic development" and "community capacity." As such, they require clarification. CED is a process by which communities can initiate and generate their own solutions

Sean Markey, Kelly Vodden, Stephen Ameyaw, John Pierce and Mark Roseland, all of Community Economic Development Centre, Simon Fraser University, British Columbia.

to their common economic problems and thereby build long-term community capacity and foster the integration of economic, social and environmental objectives (Ross/McRobie Report, 1987). CED builds upon a tradition of alternative development, which seeks greater levels of community self-reliance through the active engagement and participation of community members in the planning, decision-making and implementation of development activities.

Capacity is defined here as a the ability to identify, enhance and mobilize the human potential, economic opportunities, social relationships, and ecological resources found within a community for the purpose of improved community stability. While these four categories of capacity are listed and explored independently for the purposes of identification, the integration of the human, economic, social and ecological forms of capacity is essential for long-term community stability achieved through an adherence to the principles of sustainability.

The approach of linking community capacity to the integrative principles of sustainability differs from definitions of capacity and capacity building provided in other studies. Authors such as Hondale (1982), Fiszbein (1997), and McGuire (1994) emphasize structural and management aspects of capacity. The main difference provided here is primarily the addition of ecological criteria in the decision-making and capacity building framework. Common among these definitions of capacity, and the one provided by the CED Centre project, is the notion of capacity being an enabling factor that enhances the capabilities of people and institutions to direct or create action. Community capacity therefore is a central requirement of a broader community development process.

CAPACITY ASSESSMENT AND THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

CED is an "action-oriented" discipline. As such, problem solving exists at the core of its mandate. By creating conditions for local control, a variety of social, economic, and ecological benefits may be experienced by the surrounding community, reversing conditions of dependency and value-subtraction created through traditional, disassociated economic relationships. Benefits of local control include greater levels of accountability as a byproduct of ownership and social intimacy; capacity building; the pursuit of appropriate development initiatives grounded upon local knowledge and conditions; and, broadening of the beneficiaries of development.

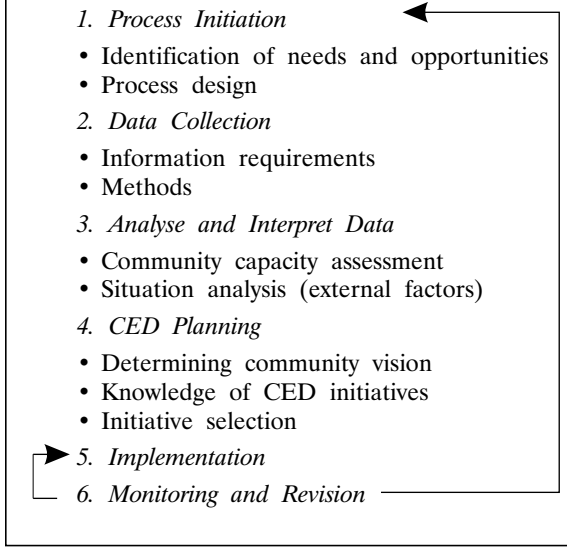
The community problem solving nature of CED has resulted in a variety of development processes in which to identify problems and opportunities, set local goals and objectives and develop strategies for the financing and implementation of development initiatives. The principles and theories of alternative development are essentially merged with variations of the strategic planning process (Galaway and Hudson, 1994):

> The difference between strategic planning and development planning is primarily one of scope. Development planning is defined as the application and broadening of strategic planning principles to include promotion of individual and community well being (Lamontagne, 1994: 210).

The use of a development framework provides a heuristic device from which the principles of CED, drawing upon alternative development theory, may be made contextually appropriate to the dynamics of a specific community and applied. Figure 1 outlines a Six Step CED Process used by the CED Centre which contains the capacity assessment process.

As Bendavid-Val (1991) points out, the function of such a model is to provide a framework in order to deal with the complexities of

FIGURE 1
Six Step CED Process



reality. In practice, CED planning and implementation will rarely follow the precise sequence of steps provided above, however, it is likely that a variation of the stages will be experienced at different times in the process. Attention to these six steps provides an avenue through which alternative development principles such as participation and the consideration of economic, social, and ecological variables may be tangibly addressed. Community capacity assessment takes place in steps two and three, providing critical contextual information that informs development decisions taken in later stages of the process.

The Need for Community Capacity Assessment

In recent years there has been a dramatic rise in interest in the concept of community capacity within fields associated with community development (Aspen Institute, 1996). The interest is linked with broader trends that have highlighted the importance of community capacity in responding to the pressures of externally driven change and to demands for greater local control rising from the community level.

External forces that influence the development patterns and prospects of communities include corporate restructuring and mobility, economic cycles, government downloading, and ecological change. The pace and extent of external forces make it necessary for communities to organize themselves to defend local interests and values. Locally derived responses require the mobilization of community capacity in the defense or offense of community stability and viability.

Internal forces calling for the application of community capacity are locally driven and inspired by the lure of alternative development, which offers an empowering contrast to the numbing effects of dependency. The transition from being consumers of services and external decisions, to becoming active participants in the development process, is one of the key motivating forces behind CED. Development activities which seek to localize benefits, balance social, economic, and ecological objectives, minimize costs, and build community are appealing in a world of centrifugal economic forces which often leave communities disconnected and with fewer long-term development options.

The combination of these external and internal forces represents a unique opportunity to those promoting alternative forms of local development. Communities and their leaders are in a position where they are relatively free from the constraints that have inhibited the promotion of alternative development in the past. For example, dependency on a single employer or industry often leads to fear of development efforts that may be seen to undermine that employer. While dominant sectors may ultimately be detracting from the long-term health and potential of a community economy, and re-investing little in the development of the community, they will often hold greater political influence than other sectors which seek diversification and local control (Halseth, 1998; Clapp, 1998). However, as corporations and governments withdraw from local communities, also disappearing are certain ideological or economic pressures that have sought to maintain the status quo. While communities are now in a position to reflect upon the long-term consequences of status quo decisions and values, they are more likely to be concerned with finding solutions to their economic, social and ecological problems. As a result, the values of economic diversity, local control, and ecological health, all central tenets of CED, are emerging in the development discourse within the province of British Columbia.

A key question remains, however. Do communities have the capacity to seek and implement alternative paths of development? Studies have shown that the capacity to undertake sustained development efforts is lacking in many communities, particularly smaller rural communities (Kinsley, 1996; Walzer, 1991; Reed and Paulson, 1990). Communities may lack leadership, the organizational requirements necessary to plan local development, economic resources, or quality surroundings, all of which contribute to a community's ability to foster local economic development. Efforts to reverse declines in economic well-being and quality of life, and seek an approach more tolerant of diversity and more supportive of local control, will require that the capacity of communities to pursue their own potential be restored and enhanced. In order to take advantage of existing community capacities, however, and take steps to build on areas requiring further development, current levels of community capacity must be assessed.

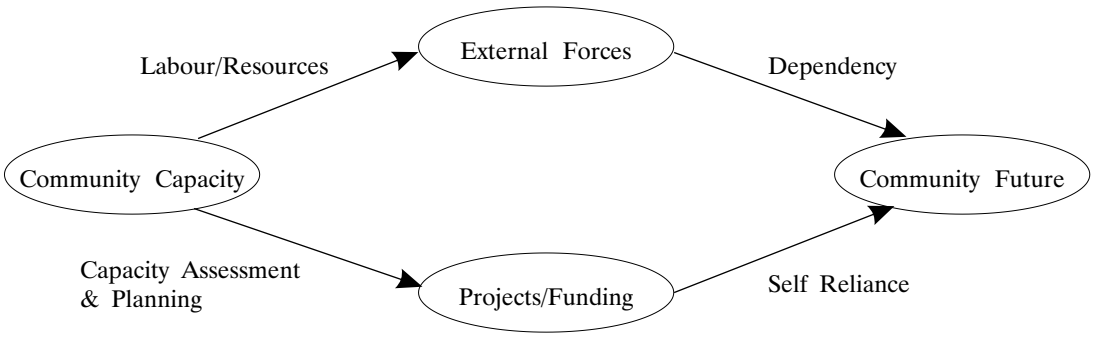
The CEDC research team identified five additional benefits of capacity assessment. First, development decisions that are based upon a clear assessment of a community's capacity have

a greater likelihood of success and of contributing to the desired future of the community. Projects and funding that are pursued in a less informed and reactive manner will face more barriers to success, as community support may be lacking or initiatives may not represent an appropriate fit with the community, financially, ecologically, or in terms of human resources. If a community is unable to generate viable development initiatives, external forces will have a larger role in determining the future of the community, creating or repeating conditions of dependency.[1] Adopting development initiatives that are beyond the capacity of the community may result in a transfer of accountability, value, and skills development to organizations and individuals outside of the community.

Second, as communities step from the historic stability of dependency and specialization, and into the uncertainty and complexity of economic diversification, they are vulnerable to a variety of factors. There are numerous approaches to growth and development. Communities must be careful to avoid short-term strategies that may merely repeat cycles of dependency. Among the list of development "fix" options are: "get rich quick" strategies that may overburden communities with unmanageable debt, inadequately represent local values, and sacrifice longer-term ecological health[2]; and catering to corporate boosterism in an attempt to achieve short-term political objectives and reverse trends of a poor investment climate. Development activities and investments based upon solid information about the community (needs and opportunities) will help to avoid over-burdening the community with false hopes or poor investment decisions based upon development trends or fads. Empowered by knowledge of their human, social, economic and ecological capacity, communities are able to pursue locally appropriate development options that mobilize and build upon local strengths. The ability to create stability through diversity and holistic development may involve aspects of a community that have not been considered of economic value in the past. Attention to the four areas of community capacity will yield a variety of development options, contributing to the overall search for and conservation of social, economic, and ecological diversity in the pursuit of community stability. In order to identify locally appropriate and diverse development strategies, community capacity assessment is a vital process for communities to experience. It provides a new lens with which to view community and economic opportunities.

As the capacity of local communities to conduct their own affairs increases, the negative consequences of core-periphery relationships, which define many rural communities, will decline. Figure 2 illustrates the value of the capacity assessment process in terms of increased self-reliance and decreased external dependency.

FIGURE 2
The Capacity Assessment Process



[1] A community may be unable to generate local development initiatives for a variety of reasons, including: lack of access to resources, lack of leadership, low skills levels, an inability to raise capital, or divisions within community that impede collective action.

[2] Daly and Cobb (1994) refer to such strategies as development that impoverishes, rather than enriches.

A third benefit of conducting capacity assessment within an overall development process is that it brings an emphasis on local realities into strategic planning that may otherwise be mechanistic and generic in nature. Planning becomes more appropriate as it is modified according to the local context. In this manner, the integrity of the framework remains intact yet is tailored to local conditions.

Fourth, capacity assessment creates a database of broad-based and varied information about communities. Once formed, the database may be developed into a community monitoring system. Community monitoring is linked with the CED process in step six. This capacity information can be used not only to measure the viability and appropriateness of proposed initiatives in the planning stage of the CED process (step 4) but also to measure the impact of development decisions and community change, both internally or externally generated, over time. With a prolonged commitment to community monitoring, longitudinal analysis of various capacity trends will help to foster proactive development in the community. Viewed over time, trends in, for example, education, the quality of the environment or resource sustainability will become apparent to community decision-makers, encouraging actions to be taken when needed.

Finally, the process of capacity assessment is in itself a capacity building exercise. Information generated may provide new insights or perspectives for community leaders and CED practitioners and can also be communicated to the community at large. Sharing information not only increases local education and awareness but may generate increased participation or support for development activities.

Collecting Capacity Assessment Information

There are a variety of community-based research methods that are compatible with the capacity assessment process. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques yield useful data. Combining both types of data sources ensures that local insights and knowledge are balanced with aggregate statistics. The following seven research methods illustrate a variety of techniques that may be used to collect data useful in assessing community capacity.

Profile — Aggregate, Quantitative, Descriptive

The community profile is a logical starting point for the capacity assessment process. Combining quantitative statistical data with descriptive data about the community, profile will provide a rough indication of the current condition of the community. Types of aggregate statistical data may include labour force, income, education levels, population and a host of others. The advantage of the statistical data is that it is usually easily attainable from Statistics Canada. It is important to note, however, that smaller communities may not benefit as much from statistical data as larger communities, as the sample size may be too large to capture local nuances. Descriptive data about the community may include information about the local infrastructure, cultural and natural amenities, government information, and other points that provide an on-the-ground picture of the community. This can be gathered through community interviews, documents, and observation (see below). If historical data is included in the statistical portion of a profile, trend analysis may be conducted, allowing the researcher or community developers an opportunity to view specific indicators over time, providing a more accurate picture of decline, stasis or improvement.

Survey

Surveys can be an important tool for measuring the perceptions of community residents. Surveys may be tailored to ask specific questions relating to tangible development issues or general thoughts on the future direction of a community. Surveys serve the added function of involving a broad cross-section of members in the community and informing people of community issues and planning processes. A survey may also help to identify residents with development ideas, resources, or interest in more involved participation. Reporting back to the community with results will keep the momentum of the process going and create positive conditions for future community involvement by establishing the credibility and sincerity of the development process.

Focus Groups

Focus groups can be particularly useful in assessing community perceptions related to specific development issues. Groups may be ran-

domly assembled or targeted to capture the thoughts of a specific sector in the community (e.g. gender, age, employment). Focus groups help to create a safe environment for open discussion and will provide a more thorough examination of development issues than a survey. Group sizes may vary, as may the interviewing time and location. A modified version of the focus group is the "living room" or "kitchen table" meeting which create a non-intimidating environment that combines research, information sharing, and socializing (Gill, 1996).

Advisory Committee

Advisory or steering committees are important for any community development process. Having a core group of volunteers and staff with specific areas of interest and knowledge about the community will create a synergy around community development and help to ensure that the process leads to action. Specifically related to the capacity assessment process, an advisory committee can provide ongoing input and assist with the process of interpreting research data and moving the CED process into initiative selection. Individual members may also "champion" different aspects of the capacity assessment process.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews can be an efficient way of assessing community capacity. By targeting specific people deemed to be knowledgeable about the community, detailed and thoughtful insight can be gathered in a short period of time. It is important to identify a range of people who will be able to reflect upon the community from different angles. Individuals in formal governing positions, local business people, and community-based organization leaders all represent potential interviewees.

Community Interviewing

Blakely (1994) has suggested that it is important to tap the local personal knowledge of community residents. Community-wide interviewing can be a time consuming process, however, it may yield the most comprehensive data about the community. Community interviewing facilitates broader participation and can be structured to inform the development process about subjective issues, such as community visioning, or more tangible development opportunities.

Asset Mapping

The purpose of asset mapping is to build collaborative relationships and direct them towards community development projects (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). The process produces a visual representation and inventory of the resources, talents, and strengths present in a community. The capacities of each community member, association, and institution are identified and recorded through a Capacity Study. Relationships between groups and individuals may then be explored to create innovative solutions to building community capacity.

The seven capacity assessment methods listed above do not provide a comprehensive overview of all possible research methods, however, they offer a sampling of different techniques that communities may adapt to suit their specific needs and development interests. Each of these methods has a variety of strengths and weaknesses. Five criteria for selecting the most appropriate methods for collecting capacity information are discussed below.

Methods Criteria

An extensive review of capacity assessment literature has been condensed into a single integrated model, see Table 1. Ideally, an assessment method would involve both the residents and community leadership and would require only modest investment of time and money. As such, criteria for selecting a set of data collection methods when conducting capacity assessment include: resident involvement, community leadership involvement, time, and cost.

The merits of each of the methods discussed above with respect to each of these four criteria can be illustrated in Table 1.

Clearly there is no "one best method" for collecting community capacity information. Communities and researchers should balance the strengths and weaknesses of different data collection options by employing more than one method. Further, weaknesses of the methods reported here can be overcome through adaptations and adjustments. For example, partnerships can be created with educational institutions to decrease the cost of profile research or conducting community interviews through student involvement. Also, levels of volunteerism may vary between communities, thereby reducing the cost of data collection.

TABLE 1
Criteria for Capacity Assessment Methods

Criteria Methods	*Resident Involvement*	*Leadership Involvement*	*Time Requirements*	*Cost*
Profile	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Survey	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Focus Group	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Advisory Committee	Low	High	Moderate	Low
Key Informants	Low	High	Low	Low
Community Interviewing	Moderate	Low	High	High
Asset Mapping	High	Moderate	High	High

CED researchers may wish to weigh the various criteria in terms of their importance to their organization. Perhaps time and cost are not significant factors and resident involvement is considered a priority. In this case, asset mapping or extensive interviewing would be the preferred approach.

The Capacity Assessment Process

Capacity assessment requires an assessment framework. The framework determines the type of data that should be collected and provides a heuristic device to simplify the complexity of community for the purposes of analysis and decision making. The framework should provide information on a variety of community attributes that help determine the success or failure of CED efforts and, building upon the principles of sustainability, include social, economic, and ecological factors. In building an assessment framework for use in the "CED for Forest-based Communities" project, it was decided that one way to measure the potential for CED in each community would be a comparison with a set of common characteristics proven to be influential in a broad cross-section of other successful communities.

Successful Community Economic Development (CED) has been defined as those activities that bring more money and employment into a community, result in increased community control over planning and resources, or create resiliency to external changes (Polese, Nozick, in Galaway and Hudson, 1994; the Aspen Institute, 1996). The definition and pursuit of success in these areas will vary greatly at the local level, reflecting the different values, culture and resources found within communities. Success in CED is therefore ultimately defined by communities.

Communities and the circumstances they face are unique and diverse. There is, therefore, no "one size fits all" recipe for success in CED. CED strategies must be suited to unique local circumstances. The development of a set of rigid, prescriptive rules for CED planning, therefore, is neither appropriate nor realistic. However, the identification of favourable conditions for success based upon development theory and the past experiences of other communities, can provide useful information for communities engaging in CED.

Drawing upon CED and other development literature, key success factors were identified. Success factors identified in the literature were divided into human, economic, social, and ecological categories. From these success factors, indicators were developed and measures for each of these indicators were identified. Using these indicators and measures, it is possible to determine the degree to which the success factors of CED are present in a community (e.g. level of community capacity). For a full list of success factors, indicators and measures see Markey and Vodden (1999).

Identified success factors, or areas of community capacity, are as shown in Table 2.

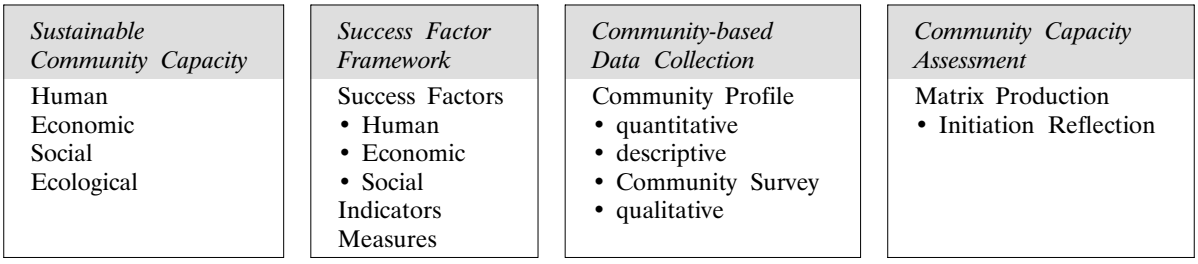
Assessing Capacity in Four B.C. Communities

Once the assessment framework had been developed the research team set to test its application in the four pilot communities involved in the "Promoting CED for Forest-based Communities"

TABLE 2
CED Success Factors

Human Capacity	*Social Capacity*
Skills and Education	Sense of Community
Leadership	Community-based Organizations
Civic Engagement	Community Participation/Planning/Cooperation
Entrepreneurial Spirit	
Labour Force	
Economic Capacity	*Ecological Capacity*
Economic Health	Ecosystem Health
Diversity	Natural Resources
Adaptability	Commercial Harvesting
Health of local businesses	Ecological Amenities
Sustainability	Stewardship
Informal economic activity	
Local Control	
Access to Capital	
Location/Infrastructure	
Service Amenities	

FIGURE 3
Capacity Assessment Conceptual Framework



project. The first stage was to collect quantitative and qualitative data from the communities to provide contextual information about each of the identified factors. After the data was collected it was compiled according to each success factor category in a capacity assessment matrix. The process can be illustrated in Figure 3.

Quantitative information was compiled by producing a community profile. Qualitative information was provided through interviews, observation and the use of a survey completed by a community-based working group. The survey was designed by adapting the success factors into questions. Asset mapping was also introduced but was not pursued at the community level.

Community Profile — Aggregate Quantitative/Descriptive

The most basic and familiar assessment tool used by the project was the community profile. Community interns produced the profiles using existing reports and data provided by Statistics Canada, making the information easily attainable. The downside of profile information is that statistical data used may already be obsolete in communities experiencing rapid change. Further, the data in some cases did not accurately reflect local conditions. It was found to be important to compare the quantitative profile data with qualitative interpretations of the community, as each informed the other. The basic profile outline used by the project is shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Community Profile Components

Quantitative	*Community Descriptive*	*Biophysical*
Trend Analysis (1986–1996): Local, Regional, Provincial Economic • employment • income • income source • labour force by sector Social • education • population • demographics • migration • health	Community Specific • local history • crime rates • health services • governing structure • ethnicity • recreational and cultural facilities/programs • infrastructure • community groups	air quality water quality biogeoclimatic zone land use designations wildlife and fisheries harvest rates ecological amenities stewardship programs

TABLE 4
Capacity Assessment Matrix Sample

Indicators (Success Factors)	*Measurement*	*Data Source/ Notes*	*Profile Results*	*Survey Results*	*Regional/Provincial Comparison*
Economic Health					
Employment	Unemployment level				
Labour Force Participation	% of participation				
Labour Force by Sector	Distribution of labour force				
Income	Income avg. and median				
Etc.					

Success Factor Survey

Members of the community working groups were asked to complete a capacity assessment survey. Questions were designed to assess the presence or absence of various success factors in the community, using a 1–5 rating system. Median values for the responses were summarized into the final community survey results. (For a copy of the survey see www.sfu.ca/cedc/forestcomm/index.htm).

Advisory Committee

It was decided during research design that the project would work with representatives of local governments and institutional entities in each of the communities (i.e. municipal governments and band councils). These representatives, and other interested community groups and members, were asked to form a working group. The task of the working group was to serve as an advisory body for the project at the community level and direct the implementation of the CED process, including capacity assessment.

Capacity Assessment Matrix

Once the data had been collected, it was necessary to compile it into a framework which allowed for a comparison between the different sources of data. A capacity assessment matrix was developed for this purpose (see Table 4 below for a sample).

Compiling and summarizing all of the data collected in the matrix provided an easy means with which to identify strengths and weaknesses in a community, differences between the statistical information and the perceptions of local

residents, and a comparison with regional and provincial statistics.

Working Group Discussions

Capacity assessment results were presented to the community-based working groups in the final phase of the capacity assessment process. A workshop was held to review the process, identify its purpose and place within the Six Step CED Planning model, and review findings. The strengths and weaknesses identified by the matrix were presented and explored by the working groups. In order to animate the findings, strengths and weaknesses were discussed in the context of different CED initiatives. For example:

- How would a specific initiative capitalize on strengths exhibited by the community?
- How would an initiative address community weaknesses?
- Which CED strategies does the community have the capacity to undertake?
- If the capacity does not currently exist within the community to build an initiative, how could it be developed?

These questions form the bridge between steps three and five in the Six Step model, moving the process from research to action.

Applying the capacity assessment results

Numerous initiatives were already being considered in each of the communities. Research and planning had been conducted for many of them. Initiative examples for the capacity assessment discussion were drawn from these existing projects in order to avoid unnecessary abstraction in the process. The research team also introduced potential initiatives and has subsequently compiled an inventory of CED initiatives in order to stimulate ideas for future projects (Smith, 1999).

The assessment provided insight into the challenges and opportunities presenting each of the four communities. Opportunities and challenges were identified for each area of community capacity: human, economic, social and ecological. For example, the Nuxalk Nation identified weaknesses in human resource capacity, particularly business planning skills. It was determined that business training would be required before opportunities could be pursued in a self-reliant manner. In Lillooet, the need for an organization mandated to own and operate community business enterprises was identified. Opportunities identified included commercial and amenity values of the surrounding ecosystem, highlighting initiatives for community resource management, tourism and business retention and attraction due to a high quality of life. Another strength noted in the communities was a strong sense of place, a necessary ingredient to sustain long-term strategies for development and community capacity building.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Development and application of a capacity assessment framework in the "CED for Forest Communities" project has provided lessons about both the methodology of capacity assessment and the benefits of its use within an overall planning process. The combination of community profile and capacity survey methods used in the project provided community working groups with a wealth of local information. From a research perspective, the capacity assessment process has yielded five major benefits to the overall CED process being conducted in the pilot communities. First, the integration of local information into the success factor framework provided the communities with a more holistic and contextual view of the development process. Economic development is not seen as a rigid process associated only with jobs and the economic base of the community. The framework illustrates how development decisions can both impact and be drawn from other aspects of the community, mainly social relationships, the role of individuals, and the health of the surrounding environment. The holistic approach to development was not merely presented in the abstract. Information was directly associated with community initiatives underway. In this manner, the integrated approach of community sustainability becomes a more tangible concept and objective.

Second, the comparison between the quantitative data of the profile and the qualitative data of the survey was a useful exercise for both SFU and community researchers, allowing for reflection upon common perceptions about each of the communities. In some cases the statistical evidence was challenged for not accurately reflecting the condition of the community while in others the perceptions of the working group members were seen to misrepresent the reality

of certain community conditions. For example, on the statistical side, the unemployment rate in the First Nations communities as represented by the profile was thought to be considerably lower than the actual rate in the community. In terms of the perceptions of community members, the contribution of the service sector to the community economy was noted by many to be higher than they had originally thought. Also, the unemployment level in one of the municipalities was shown statistically to be lower than the average rate for the province, including the Lower Mainland, yet the unemployment level was noted in the survey to be a primary concern and objective of the working group.

Third, the combination of the information from the profile and the survey into a community capacity matrix enabled working group members to quickly identify the main strengths and weakness of their community. While methods of presenting the data needs to be refined further, the process is designed to yield data that is both easily available to rural communities and in a format which can be understood and integrated into the decision-making process. The identification of strengths is key, as the pursuit of self-reliance demands that a community engage in development activities for which it is inherently suited. A key tenet of strategic planning is that organizations or communities build upon their existing strengths, rather than pursuing activities that exceed their existing capacity. Weaknesses identified in the community represent areas where capacity building activities may be pursued.

Fourth, linked with the previous point, the strengths and weaknesses of a community highlight key areas for the identification of possible development initiatives. Continuing research in the project is exploring how the findings from the capacity assessment process may be used to identify appropriate matches to CED initiatives such as training, development corporations and community resource management. Reflection upon ongoing and potential CED projects based on capacity assessment findings serves two purposes: first, communities may reassess opportunities and challenges associated with projects they are currently pursuing in light of new information; and second, new CED projects may be inspired that build upon existing capacity or create capacity where the need for development has been identified. Finally, as listed above, the communities have been provided with a foundation of information from which a community monitoring system may be developed. The success factor framework provides a starting point for the organization of community information. A monitoring system will enable a community to track the impact of various development decisions. Successes can be celebrated and failures can be redesigned or abandoned, however, central to the pursuit of community self reliance is self or community knowledge. Monitoring places responsibility and ownership over the development of a community into the hands of community members. Much like GIS information is being used by communities throughout the province to gather and track local ecological information, a CED monitoring system can expand this process to include other aspects of the community that were previously or remain the responsibility of external institutions, be they governments or corporations.

The community capacity assessment process provides an empowering tool to communities engaging in broad-based, long-term community economic development planning. The underlying hypothesis behind the development of this tool is that communities will make better development decisions if they are provided with quality information. The consideration and integration of the human, economic, social, and ecological aspects of community capacity expands the horizons of economic development planning and embodies the integrative principles of sustainable development.

As communities experience the change and transition associated with current economic realities, it is useful to remember that the historical development of communities throughout British Columbia in the post-war period was not accidental. Decisions were made and plans were implemented that would fundamentally alter the landscape, culture and economy of the province. This process is merely repeating itself, albeit in an accelerated and more diversified manner. The lessons of the past dictate that communities must have a greater say over their own future to achieve community stability. In order to accomplish this, communities must enhance internal and external relationships, organize, plan and build upon their strengths and resources. Understanding which forms of capacity are most relevant and representative of community values is a process facilitated by the community capacity assessment process outlined above.

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