

GET THE WORD OUT

CED success is no mystery, but it will remain a secret without national co-ordination

by Nicole Nelles & Doug Weir

Communities, both rural and urban, struggle to survive economic transition and to build sustainable local economies. Many succeed. Yet many others invest significant resources in “economic development” in return for little durable improvement to the well-being of their residents.

In many cases local leadership, elected and voluntary, has been either unwilling or unable to give up the top-down “industrial recruitment” model of economic development so prevalent in the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s. Even historically, this practice did not benefit all members of the community. Nowadays, globalization and the information economy are acting to reduce the number of beneficiaries still further. Traditional manufacturing plants are being downsized, consolidated, or closed down, leaving more and more people excluded from adequate employment.

Hanging on to traditional notions of economic development will not work for many communities in the new millennium. Decision-makers of every stripe are suffering from such an overload of information that their actual choices tend to be less well-founded than when they had less information at their disposal. To put it another way: we tend to know more while understanding less. Decisions are therefore taken in the face of greater uncertainty. The risks assumed are higher.

If leaders sincerely desire to improve their community’s circumstances, they must become aware of real alternatives. But what are the “real alternatives”? What is the most effective way to get this information?

To the first question, our answer is unequivocal. Community economic development presents an increasingly powerful instrument to communities faced by economic, social, and environmental challenges. The initiatives taken by a growing number of community-based organizations across this country – those are the “real alternatives” that leaders need to hear about.

The answer to the second is more difficult. The CED movement in Canada still lacks a *cohesive vision*. Many CED organizations operate in isolation, pursuing the same strategies, encountering the same obstacles as similar groups in other communities. How are they to learn from the experiences of their peers?

Fortunately, a national organization has come into being to meet this need. The Canadian CED Network (CCEDNet) offers a unifying value system and a set of *professional standards* to give CED authority as an alternative economic development model and to maximize its effectiveness in finding local solutions. It gets the word out about

communities that have *lived the theory*, with the intention of accelerating a *practical* (as opposed to academic) understanding of CED.

CCEDNet’s membership includes some of this country’s “high profile” CED consultants and researchers. There are many urban and rural practitioners representing organizations with an established record of achievement. And there are also relative newcomers to the field, searching for effective responses to local distress. Together, they can call upon a treasury of experience, expertise, and commitment in their efforts to define, develop, and support CED best practice.

Revelstoke, B.C. is CCEDNet member. Here, over the past 16 years, a development system has evolved based upon planning and research, building organizational capacity, and projects (see profile this issue, p. 30). We made no conscious decision to pursue CED. It was an abiding interest in the development and management of community resources for community benefit which led us down this path.

In fact, we blazed some of the trail. (One of the beauties of this field is the opportunity it presents to the “social entrepreneur.”) Today, one of the responsibilities which Revelstoke assumes is to explain its experience to others. Our leaders periodically put themselves at the disposal of representatives from other small towns, to discuss and demystify the CED process. With a representative on CCEDNet’s Policy working group, Revelstoke also helps to develop and promote national and local policies which can create an environment supportive of CED initiatives. (See the draft policy framework, pp. 21-32 this issue.)

Membership in the Canadian CED Network is open to any and all individuals and organizations who support its mission, values, and goals. Many affiliate themselves as friends. Join this national effort to develop and disseminate an alternative economic model and build stronger communities *together*. ☺

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