Place-based Governance in Newfoundland and Labrador: A Wicked Concept
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> The British refer to wicked issues as those which are complex, non-linear, span conventional boundaries, require the gaze of many stakeholders, cannot be managed by single agencies acting autonomously, and depend on systemic change for real progress.[3] Young people these days refer to wicked ideas, games, fashions, etc., meaning excellent, amazing or cool. We may interpret place-based governance as wicked from both angles, but in no way do we intend to imply that it is wicked in the biblical sense.

Collaborative, more devolved initiatives have become a keystone of government policy across a wide range of jurisdictions in the last twenty years. In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Strategic Social Plan (SSP) is best viewed as a single jurisdiction's attempt to achieve this in the areas of social policy development and program delivery. A critical component of the SSP was meaningful involvement of both the voluntary, community-based sector and citizens. Implicit in the Plan was a significant overhaul in the way Government did its business. It was _not_ an integrated set of policies but a _process_ to strengthen social planning and make services more responsive to the needs of people and communities. SSP implementation began in 1998 and finished in 2004. A case study of its origins, structure, political and cultural context, as well as its evolution, can potentially inform thinking about efforts to engage the general citizenry and the voluntary sector in more devolved forms of governance.

Attempts at collaboration must be understood within cultural and historical contexts. Indeed, our reading of the literature suggests this point is not always as fully appreciated as it might be. Newfoundland and Labrador's experience makes this point forcefully, we believe. The province has a highly centralized and hierarchical political history embedded within a political culture characterized by passive, patron-client relationships between governor and governed. Municipal institutions are relatively new and fragile and local leadership weakly developed.[4] Collaborative efforts among community groups are restricted for the most part to local events[5] or specific constituencies (literacy, women's groups, violence prevention, etc.). [6] Seen in this context, the SSP represents a unique attempt to implement a community-based governance model on a broad scale, i.e. a provincial level. The SSP is also a closed case, allowing an examination not possible if it were still alive.

Government, Communities and the Voluntary Sector

The literature describes what a more devolved approach to governance looks like, gives the presumed benefits and rationale for such an approach, and talks about prerequisites for success.

What Does It Look Like? One could call the SSP an endeavour in 'networked government', a convergence of outsourced (private and non-profit sectors delivering services) and joined-up government (integrated service delivery by linking up government agencies) – the weaving together of multiple levels and combinations of government units and private and non-profit providers.[7] Or we could use Ansell's (2000) descriptor, 'networked polity'… where the brains are "decentralized and distributed, and coordination is achieved more through mutual adjustment than through command and control…"[8] Paquet (2004) and Innes and Booher (2004) see the

collaborative framework as a 'complex adaptive system'… "a multi-dimensional model where communication, learning and action are joined together and where polity, interests and citizenry co-evolve…"[9] Put simply, multi-sectoral collaboration brings together government, civil society and the private sector in networks to tackle complex problems. A community-based approach taps into local knowledge and ideas. Though the SSP was meant to do these things, we will see that it fell short for a number of reasons.

Why Do It? The Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet) rationale for investing in communities suggests that, "When communities are by-passed or marginalized… a vicious circle of destructive social and economic forces tends to reinforce the trouble... economically challenged communities… instead of contributing… exacerbate national social and economic problems…"[10] It is in communities and neighbourhoods where people live and work, that the effects of policies and programs are felt, human and social capital is built, opportunities for innovative and local solutions can be found. Even the Auditor General for Canada (2005) has said that communities expect more integrated program delivery and referred to a promising governance model as one developed from the ground up. This method, say Innes and Booher, builds societal capacity and produces innovative responses to seemingly retractable problems.[11]

The SSP structure was intended not only to focus on communities for integrated service delivery, but to enable communities to provide input that would influence policy development. Phillips (2006) talks about 'policy governance' as empowering and building the capacity of non-governmental actors (citizens, voluntary organizations)… producing "more informed, activist and skilled citizens… stronger networks among voluntary organizations …greater trust and confidence in and respect for other participants and the governance process..."[12] Paquet (2004) talks about partnerships as contributing to "the construction of collective intelligence and to the fostering of social learning… through which a community may harness its intellectual, informational, physical, and human resources to produce a continuous flow of innovative and useable knowledge."[13]

Successful networks have advantages over hierarchies – flexibility, innovation, specialization, and speed. (Eggers and Goldsmith, 2004) Leviten-Reid (2006) goes so far as to suggest that government organizations view all their objectives not as ends in themselves but as parts of an overarching goal: building the assets of individuals and communities.

What are the Prerequisites for Successful Implementation? There is an overall consensus in the literature on the key elements required for successful place-based collaborative governance:

- **A cultural and structural transformation across government** to enable inter-departmental, inter-governmental, inter-organizational and multi-sectoral collaborative decision-making; higher-level leadership facilitating horizontal coordination; overcoming turfism; empowerment of people on the front-lines; program flexibility and responsiveness.

- **Executive level commitment** Reshaping government starts at the top, with the nurturing of alliances and partnerships across sectors and the imposition across government of the new way. Support is needed from elected officials, central agencies and senior civil servants.

- **Skilled network managers** "entailing a whole new set of competencies… in the public sector: coaching, mediation, negotiation, risk analysis, contract management, ability to tackle unconventional problems, strategic thinking, interpersonal communications, project and business management, and team building."[14]

- **Human and social capital / Community capacity / Inclusion** New competencies are needed in the voluntary sector and among citizens. Community engagement starts with information and inclusive outreach and leads to ongoing network facilitation to encourage an open exchange of ideas. Organizational silos and community factions have to be bridged. The sustaining architecture must provide "the means and resources to maintain a dialogue or a conduit between insiders and outsiders".[15] This is a chicken and egg situation, as engagement itself builds skills and social capital.

- **Linkage Mechanisms** Community issues tend to run into a policy wall. Only through dialogue between community members and policy-makers can local knowledge contribute to policy development.[16]

- **Longevity** Place-based networked governance is a long-term affair.

Effective governance, argues Paquet (2004), requires communication, inclusive deliberative local forums, short feedback learning loops and experimental prototypes (freedom to try quick-and-dirty actions and dialogue around them, rather than stall in the quest for a comprehensive plan).[17] Leviten-Reid (2006) concurs, describing a process constantly in beta testing mode, trying out things and adjusting.[18]

Newfoundland and Labrador had a comprehensive plan, though vague in certain respects, but little capacity to implement. Demonstration projects were developed but they were neither holistic in thinking nor collaborative in development, with no evaluation or monitoring. Given the lack of local institutional supports and participatory political culture this is not surprising. Even if there had been a successful project with an integrated approach, there was no continuing funding. The SSP was a top down initiative for a bottom up solution, with many key elements missing. The efforts over the years of its existence reflect this paradoxical nature.

SSP Origins and Development

It is not difficult to understand how this collaborative initiative arose, despite the lack of key foundational supports. A number of factors, both local and larger, encouraged such a radical turn from traditional political processes.

Similar to other primary resource-based economies with little or no local ownership or control, Newfoundland and Labrador has seldom known steady, long-term prosperity. The collapse of the northern cod fishery, dating from 1992, brought gale force economic and social dislocation that buffeted hundreds of communities that had lived off cod for centuries. In the mid-90's, as governments focused on deficit reduction, budget cuts led to school closures, government downsizing and drastic decreases in funding to community groups. Socio-demographic trends

such as low birth rate, aging population and high out-migration created additional pressures. Families abandoned their homes in search of a living and a sense of crisis prevailed. Focusing on communities in the development of a social plan was a natural step.

The Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador, a significant force for social policy change from its inception in 1976, realized that piecemeal policy interventions were not sufficient and as early as 1985 called for a long-term strategic plan within the social policy sector, to work in tandem with economic development initiatives. By the mid-90's, concepts like community, decentralized, bottom-up and integrated approaches to economic and social development had become a regular part of the policy discourse. The fact that such movements gained momentum in other jurisdictions, Canadian as well as foreign, added legitimacy.

In 1998, after an extensive public consultation led by a Social Policy Advisory Committee, *People, Partners and Prosperity: A Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador* was released by Government to complement its 1992 Strategic Economic Plan. The SSP endorsed the concepts of building on community and regional strengths, linking social and economic development, prevention and early intervention, and evidence-based decision-making for the design, delivery and evaluation of policies, programs and services.

Values-Added Community University Research Alliance (CURA)

Values-Added CURA has looked at the implementation of the Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador from the perspectives of academic learning, community-based planning and policy development. The research, ongoing since 2001, has included voluntary sector focus groups, numerous interviews with politicians, bureaucrats, members of the former Regional Steering Committees and representatives of voluntary organizations. The following analysis is based on that research.[19, 20]

The government installed three complementary pieces of machinery to facilitate interdepartmental collaboration, public consultation and citizen engagement in the policymaking process, and to link voluntary organizations and communities more directly to government:

The Premier's Council on Social Development (PCSD), appointed to advise the Premier and Cabinet on social policy, social development and SSP implementation, conducted research, assessment activities and roundtable discussions and established eleven ad hoc committees to enhance its analytical capacity. The PCSD did not raise controversial issues. It rendered advice when asked.

The Strategic Social Plan Office (SSPO), with an Assistant Deputy Minister, was the PCSD's secretariat, was responsible for building and coordinating links among government departments, coordinated work on the Social Audit and preparation of the Community Accounts to meet the goal of evidence-based policy development and monitoring, was the interface between government and the Regional Steering Committees (RSCs) and supported their work through funding, planning, etc.

The SSPO had to invent its role as it went along, as there were no existent models. It brought the RSCs on line and achieved some coordination among departments with social affairs responsibilities. It was able to access all parts of government, and its head could communicate with top officials. However, SSP implementation would necessitate convincing Deputy Ministers heading big budget line departments to sacrifice some of their autonomy and reallocate resources. Not an easy task.

Although the Premier and the Minister of Health and Community Services (with SSP responsibility) supported the SSP, there is little evidence that moving beyond traditional, compartmentalized government (bridging silos) had been thought through or that it was a priority for anyone at the top. Leadership was the responsibility of the SSPO, but the magnitude of the mission was huge and resistance to change entrenched. We might also ask if seeking inter-departmental coordination to implement a plan based on process not deliverables was in itself a disincentive to horizontal collaboration?

The SSPO had to represent government to the regions as well as the regions to government. An Office representative attended RSC meetings, and each RSC had some travel money and a Regional Planner, paid through the SSPO but responsible to the Committee. The Planner was the conduit between SSPO, RSC and community. The SSPO perceived part of its role to be raising the analytical capacity of the RSCs, and hired a full-time researcher, who conducted workshops with the Committees. This dovetailed nicely with work on the Social Audit and Community Accounts, useful tools for social development planning.

Regional Steering Committees (RSCs) Government made a commitment to build partnerships among regional Health Institutions Boards, Health and Community Services Boards, School Boards and Regional Economic Development Boards and accommodate other partners such as municipalities, community-based groups, and provincial and federal government service providers. RSCs were to apply collaborative, flexible, place-based strategies to:

- The delivery of services to meet the needs of people and communities
- The coordination of initiatives and integration of social and economic investments
- The articulation of the needs of regions to government.

Each RSC was to develop a strategy reflecting regional priorities and to build and support community involvement and action. The RSC structure did facilitate more horizontal linkages among regional departments and agencies but their efforts to involve the community were passive, and the relationship became essentially unidirectional, i.e. service provider to client. There was even less effort to reach out to business, represented on RSCs only through economic development boards.

RSCs realized this shortcoming. They organized workshops, town hall meetings and other forums, but the sole attempt towards a structure for citizen engagement to undertake holistic broad-based community planning and initiatives was the formation of Leadership Teams in two localities in one region. Still, they had no membership on the RSC and no formal input into regional decision-making.

Neither community groups, nor community leaders nor ordinary citizens had a strong grasp of the SSP or the role of the RSC. And the voluntary sector was in itself not organized to promote collaboration beyond planning occasional community events together or working across communities in silos based on population groups (women, literacy, etc.). However, when focus group participants from voluntary organizations were given an overview of the role defined for the voluntary sector under the SSP, they were interested in becoming involved, talked about issues restraining their participation and discussed models to enhance their ability to become engaged. Such a model would be multifaceted and help overcome commonly shared capacity issues as well as provide a forum for input into the SSP Committee. They spoke about their organizations and communities interchangeably, and the broader issue of community survival was a recurring theme.

Lack of knowledge of the SSP, the silo nature of both the voluntary sector and government, the complexity and lack of capacity to build bridges and develop effective linkages, as well as geography and travel costs, difficulty understanding the impact regional priorities would have on communities, and competition and resentments around government investments, all hindered the engagement of communities.

But even if there had been time, skills and resources to overcome these barriers, there remained the fact that there was no mechanism designed specifically for the purpose of linking the SSP Committees to the upper levels of government. PCSD members were invited to sit on the SSP Committee in the region where they lived, but the PCSD had no explicit role in regional SSP implementation. The SSPO was responsible for SSP implementation, but mainly provided administrative and planning support to the regional SSP committees. Although the SSPO ensured that a member of the Executive of government sat on each regional SSP Committee and made attempts to encourage horizontal approaches within the Executive, there was no formal mechanism to hear integrated regional advice, to respond collaboratively across departments to regional needs, and to jointly manage regional initiatives and investments. The mechanisms that existed could not effectively do this, as it was not their job. So little action was taken on requests for flexible, adapted or new interventions. Head office of Government could not hear such requests, and its capacity to respond was minimal.

Lessons Learned

There are at several important lessons from the SSP experience for any jurisdiction undertaking collaborative, place-based governance initiatives.

- **Critical Importance of Linking Mechanisms**

    o *Head* Comprehensive understanding at the uppermost levels of government concerning what place-based collaborative governance is and what it requires. This must also be shared at the community level. Powerful political, bureaucratic and community champions must be in place and share a largely similar vision.

- o *Feet* Community engagement entails ongoing outreach to people and groups at the grassroots level, network and capacity building, skills development, and more autonomy on the front lines.

- o *Ears and Spine* Government must be able to hear, consider and act on policy and program advice that is channelled up from regions and localities. This necessitates a mechanism for regional and community input to reach the highest levels.

- **Financial and Human Resources** Dedicated human and financial resources are required at all levels to build networks, skills and organizational capacity, facilitate collaboration and design flexible programs.

- **Longevity** Collaborative, place-based governance requires significant time commitment.

Under SSP implementation, RSC efforts to work horizontally were not connected to upper level decision-making, and money still flowed through programs in line departments. RSCs could do little in the way of holistic, place-based service delivery. However, RSCs were planning joint investments where they could on a small scale. After RSC dismantling, former members generally felt frustrated and disrespected. They were committed to the SSP, had built productive relationships, and then saw themselves tossed aside for something completely different as government changed.

Conclusion

As political culture changes and greater capacity, understanding and commitment emerge at the community and voluntary sector level, collaborative governance initiatives will continue and the emphasis on place may grow. The Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador offers an example of the difficulty of imposing a bottom up solution to social policy development and service delivery without the history and foundation to enable success. The SSP has demonstrated that dramatically innovative strategies require novel and carefully crafted policy instruments, revision of government's standard operating procedures and a long settling-in period.

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Endnotes

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