Planning the Future of Rural Newfoundland and Labrador by Engaging the Public: From the Strategic Social Plan to the Rural Secretariat.[1]

David Close, Penelope Rowe and Carla Wheaton

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ABSTRACT

From 1998 to 2004 Newfoundland and Labrador had a unique Strategic Social Plan (SSP) built around bringing the voluntary, community-based sector (VCBS) into the policy process, instead of presenting an array of policies. This work examines three instruments developed to link the VCBS and government: a consultative council, an Executive Council secretariat and regional boards. It finds that the council worked well, perhaps because of open support from government; the secretariat was a necessary and useful instrument, limited by a small staff; the boards, the SSP's heart, were inadvertently structured in ways that discouraged VCBS participation.

INTRODUCTION

Newfoundland and Labrador has had a "rural question" since entering Confederation in 1949. The well-being and economic prospects of the province's rural communities brought its government to undertake its first experiment in large scale social engineering from 1954 to 1975: resettlement, the relocation of entire communities from isolated coastal zones to more centrally located areas where normal citizens' services could be provided. In 1957, rural Newfoundland and Labrador received the attention of policymakers again, this time from Ottawa in the form of unemployment insurance for fishers. One effect of this policy was to preserve the viability of fishing communities in Atlantic Canada by providing income security for those in the fishery. That stability lasted until the collapse of the cod fishery in 1992, which devastated fishing communities in Newfoundland and Labrador. In that environment two further policies were produced centring on Newfoundland and Labrador's rural question: the Strategic Social Plan (SSP), 1998-2005, and its successor, the Rural Secretariat (RS), 2004-present. This paper examines these last two policies, giving greater attention to the SSP, because it was longer lived and because it was the more radical departure from past practice.

Though quite distinct from one another, the SSP and the RS both differ markedly from earlier approaches, because neither actually has delivered social programs or concrete community development policies. Rather, both have stressed developing processes to allow the

communities themselves to participate in finding solutions to the problems they face. Thus the critical parts of each are the mechanisms used to let communities do this work.

To examine those mechanisms the paper is divided into three parts. The first and longest looks at the Strategic Social Plan's history, structure, and function. A shorter second part does the same for the Rural Secretariat. The conclusion compares the two initiatives and asks what others might learn from the two approaches.

THE SSP

Introduced in 1998, following extensive public consultation, the SSP sought to use the voluntary community-based sector (VCBS), especially in rural communities, to strengthen social policy planning and improve the delivery of social programs. On the one hand, the voluntary sector would deliver services under contract from government. On the other, the VCBS would be actively engaged in developing social programs that centered on community needs. Combined, these were to help stop the outflow of rural residents and build stable, vibrant communities that would be part of a rural renaissance in Newfoundland and Labrador. Nevertheless, because it was a strategic social policy plan, the SSP did not limit its focus to rural areas. The province's only city included in Statistics Canada's census metropolitan areas, St. John's, the two paper mill towns, Corner Brook and Grand Falls, as well as the other larger communities, were all included in the Plan's six regions.

Its focus on rural communities made the SSP look more like a community development plan than a social policy document, but government decided that addressing the needs of rural communities was the province's most pressing social issue. However, this choice produced an interesting dilemma. Although some organizations that comprise the VCBS have regular working ties with government, most do not. This is partly because governments are not set up to

take account of community needs, as such. Governments are structured along functional lines and do not find it easy to cross those lines to prepare a mix of policies tailor-made to meet the needs of a given place. They make health policy, economic policy, and education policy, but they normally do not make place-based, community policy.

Because there is no community policy there can be no community policy network. In policy networks actors are bound together by common material interests that lead to significant ongoing interaction within a general framework of policy ideas (Hessing and Howlett 1997:76). There is, however, at least a potential community-policy community. This infelicitous phrase signifies a set of interested political actors who do not interact regularly with government but whose common policy knowledge continues to create a subset of significant policy actors (Hessing and Howlett 1997: 76). The VCBS, qua sector, is an example of a policy community without an easily identifiable entry point to the policy-making process.

Obviously, putting the SSP into action necessitated mechanisms to link voluntary organizations and their communities more directly to government. Although individual organizations had working relationships with some departments of government, no means existed to connect the diverse VCBS to the central decision-making parts of the state. To fill the lacuna, the provincial government put in place three distinct but complementary pieces of machinery: an advisory committee, the Premier's Council on Social Development (PCSD); a special secretariat within the Executive Council responsible for the Plan, the SSP Office -- originally the SSP Unit; and six regional steering committees that would be the nodal points of linkage between government and the province's communities.[3]

Fully operational only in 2001, the Plan did not long survive a change of government in 2003. Although the SSP was not finally and formally wrapped up until 2005, the new

Progressive Conservative administration of Danny Williams introduced a successor in 2004: the

Rural Secretariat (RS).

An Overview[4]

Strategy means having a central, long-term objective and devising means to secure that

objective; and strategy necessarily implies planning. Strategic planning, by extension, suggests

"highly structured, future-oriented management techniques" (Berry and Wechsler 1995: 159)

that better "(align) an organization with its environment" (Kissler, et al, 1998: 353). This

demands that a strategic plan be "action-oriented (and)…carefully linked to implementation"

(Poister and Streib 2005: 46). Although strategic planning in general has its critics (Mintzberg

1994), and there are specific caveats issued with regard to strategic planning by governments

(Campbell 2002; cf. Berry and Wechsler 1995), there are nevertheless clear successes (Kissler, et

al, 1998; House and McGrath 2004).

It was Premier Clyde Wells (1989-1996) who brought strategic government planning to

Newfoundland and Labrador. Wells introduced both a strategic plan for the province's economy

(1992) and the initial version of the SSP. While the Strategic Economic Plan was brought into

play to help the province adjust to federal spending cuts to social programs and the burdens these

placed on the provincial budget, the SSP's origins lie in pressure from outside government to

focus on social, not just economic, development. Meanwhile, the 1992 collapse of the cod

fishery and demographic trends (low birth rate, aging population, high out-migration) placed

even greater pressure on Newfoundland and Labrador's social programs. In 1993, Wells

announced that government would develop a strategic social plan. His successor, fellow Liberal

Brian Tobin, issued a discussion paper in 1996 and also established a Social Policy Advisory

Committee (SPAC) to conduct a public dialogue. The SPAC's report (1997a; 1997b) combined

the themes raised in the public consultations with a set of conceptual benchmarks that included

governance, partnerships, public consultation, citizen engagement and accountability. Thus, the

conceptual core of the report was built around concern with the effects of government

withdrawal from the social arena, on the one hand, and questions about the representativeness

and responsiveness of contemporary governments, on the other.[5]

Concretely, the SPAC called for a new approach to social policy that would be "founded

on the concept of social development and which acknowledges the essential roles of individuals

and communities in fostering social and economic well-being" (GNL 1998:8). The provincial

government accepted the SPAC's report and created both interdepartmental and ministerial

committees to translate it into policy. In 1998, it released the final product: *People, Partners and*

Prosperity: A Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador (GNL 1998a).

The SSP advocated a place-based model for development that encouraged a more

collaborative form of governance. Place-based refers to expanding the focus of policy making to

include regions (here defined by a mix of geographical and socio-economic criteria); while

collaborative governance suggests incorporating more non-governmental actors in the design and

delivery of policies. As such, it represented a significant off-path change in the province's

approach to policy formulation, program design, and service delivery. The Plan also proposed

increased partnerships involving the provincial government, the federal government,

communities, and voluntary organizations as the basis of sustainable development (Rowe &

Randell 1999). The SSP's four goals (GNL 1998, 23-32) both summarized the expected

outcomes of the Plan and provided rough benchmarks by which to assess its success:

- Vibrant communities where people are actively involved.
- Sustainable regions based on strategic investment in people.
- Self-reliant, healthy, educated citizens living in safe communities.
- Integrated and evidence-based policies and programs.

At the heart of the SSP was a new way to make social policy, built around "a partnership approach to policy development and service delivery" (GNL 1998a:10). The partners here were to be the state, the SSP regional committees, and the VCBS. What is significant is not the talk of service delivery, a common theme of public-private partnerships (PPP), but rather the reference to policy development. The SSP held out the promise of bringing the voluntary sector and the communities in which the sector's organizations are rooted into the policymaking process.

To do this, the SSP aimed to integrate social and economic policy planning more closely and to engage communities, especially the VCBS, directly in the policy process through membership in the Regional Steering Committees. These objectives focus on the input and conversion facets of policymaking, not the concrete policies that result. This was a "process is policy" strategic plan. And because the Plan was about a process, the instruments devised to implement the SSP had to facilitate that process by linking communities and the voluntary sector to government in untested ways.

The Linkage Mechanisms

Engaging the community-based voluntary sector in the policy process requires specially crafted instruments. Three devices were used by the SSP: the Premier's Council on Social Development, the SSP Office, and the Regional Steering Committees.

The Premier's Council on Social Development (PCSD)[6]

Advisory or consultative councils are familiar parts of the machinery of government in developed democracies, yet they are little studied as an instrument of governing. A few points can be put forward, however. First, there are two classes of these organizations: ad hoc expert panels formed to report on a specified problem and which then disband, like the SPAC; and standing advisory bodies, like the PCSD. Councils in this second class can be composed mainly

of *ex oficio* representatives (i.e., the current holders of positions that must be represented) or feature principally individual appointments. The key trait all these organizations share is that they offer advice, which government need not accept.

The SSP recommended the PCSD's establishment to ensure "the effectiveness of (government-community) partnerships and (achieve) the strategic directions outlined in the Plan" (GNL 1998:18). Indeed, government's first step in implementing the Plan was to establish the PCSD to advise the premier and cabinet on "social policy, social development, and on the implementation of the goals and objectives of the Strategic Social Plan" (GNL 1998b). The Council had 18 members, a third of whom were appointed every year, with re-appointment possible. The majority of these were drawn from the VCBS and social (e.g., health and education) sectors (see Table 1), but there were also members from the business and the artistic communities. The government appointed members on the basis of expertise "in matters relating to social development" and the need to reflect "the diverse views and regions of the province" to "provide advice on provincial directions for social development" (GNL 1998a:17). Through research, assessment activities and roundtable discussions, the Council was to offer advice on the various issues and questions referred to its members by government.

Table 1: Members of the Premier's Council on Social Development by Sector Representation, 1998-2004				
Voluntary, Community-Based	Health	Education	Business	Other
11	6	8	6	3

Neither the chair, named by government, nor any of the members was paid. The Council met four times a year in two-day sessions in the capital. Usually in these meetings one ministry, such as the Department of Finance or Department of Justice (PCSD 2002a; 2002b), presented a report describing how its activities influenced social policy in general and the SSP in particular.

The Council also had significant capacity for independent action. At its inaugural meeting (PCSD 1998) members of the Council asked if they were restricted to issues referred to them. The minister responsible for the SSP, Julie Bettney, assured them that they did not have to wait for a request from Cabinet but could initiate studies, as long as these were related to the SSP. The principal limitation was that PCSD would not have its own staff but would have to count on other departments or seek approval from the Cabinet Secretariat to be able to engage consultants.

A few examples demonstrate how the PCSD used its independence. First, it established a series of ad hoc committees (Figure 2), something not anticipated in its terms of reference. These enhanced the Council's analytical capacity and kept the PCSD active between plenary sessions. The Council also acted independently when vacancies occurred, recommending nominations to the premier who accepted them (Warren 2003). The advice aimed at getting better representation for certain sectors, concretely those with physical handicaps and those from very small communities, and not specific nominees.

Figure 2: PCSD Subcommittees and Working Groups
Subcommittees: - on the Social Audit   - on the Role of the Community-Based Sector in Economic Development   - on Student Aid   - on Ministerial Panel Report on Education Issues   - on Social Inclusion   Working Groups: - on creation of local advisory committees for Arts and Culture Centres (Dept. of Tourism, Culture and Recreation)   - on Health and Community Services Issues   - on the Voluntary Community-Based Sector   - on the Review of Social Assistance Legislation   - on Social Housing   - on the Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada Royal Commission

The Council's activities reflected the scope of the SSP. Its initial charge was to advise government on developing the Social Audit. This was a Strategic Social Plan initiative to determine "what is working, why, how and for whom" by measuring and comparing certain social indicators like employment levels, demographic change and general well being around the province (GNL 1998b). As well, the Council reminded ministers and officials that they should consult with the Council on social development issues, and worked with the government's other consultative committee, the Advisory Committee on the Economy and Technology (ACET) to seek the integrated approach to social and economic policy the SSP advocated (PCSD 1999).

An important indicator of the Council's success is the fact that several departments asked for its advice on policy issues. For example, the PCSD established a subcommittee to advise the Interdepartmental Committee on Supportive Housing. Similarly, the Minister of Human Resources and Employment requested the Council's views on how best to support the VCBS and strengthen the sector's links with government. The Council created a subcommittee to work with the SSP Office to prepare a discussion paper and develop recommendations. In November 2002, it presented its report to the Social Policy Committee of Cabinet. As well, the PCSD also reviewed draft legislation proposing changes to the Income and Employment Support Act (2002), monitored implementation of the province's Strategic Literacy Plan, and delivered workshops on social inclusion to government.

A number of factors explain the PCSD's level of activity. First, it enjoyed the support of the two premiers[7] during whose governments the Council was active. Second, interviews with three chairs of the PCSD (Doyle 2003; Saunders 2003; Warren 2003) indicated that the Council's members "left their sectoral hats at the door" and threw their energy into building the Council. As a result, they got to pursue an independent research agenda and occasionally could

take the initiative in offering advice to cabinet. Yet, although the PCSD was active, it does not

appear to have raised controversial issues (Close, Rowe, and Wheaton 2003). Nor was there

evidence that the Council had built formal links to the VCBS, or even to the SSP Regional

Committees. It remained a consultative council which rendered advice when asked.

The Strategic Social Plan Office (SSPO)

      Although the SSP was not the property of any one department, it had a bureaucratic home

in the Strategic Social Plan Office, a part of the provincial Executive Council Office. The SSPO

had four functions. First, it was the PCSD's secretariat. Second, it was responsible for building

and coordinating the links among government departments that were needed to make the SSP

work. Third, it coordinated work on the Social Audit and the preparation of the Community

Accounts,[8] profiles of the social well being of the province's communities, which were needed to

meet the SSP's goal of evidence-based policy development and monitoring (GNL 1998: 30).

Finally, it served as the interface between government and the SSP Regional Steering

Committees.[9] This seems quite a burden for a six-person secretariat. Nevertheless, it did bring

the regional steering committees on line and, according to a former cabinet minister (Warren

2003), achieved a measure of coordination among departments with social affairs

responsibilities.

      Officials who worked with the Office (SSPO 2003; Rural Secretariat 2005a) report that

the SSPO had to invent its role as it went along; in fact no other outcome was possible. Since the

Plan was based on building a process for integrating communities and community-based

voluntary associations into social policy making, and because it specifically called for

interdepartmental partnerships (GNL 1998: 32), there were no models ready to use. Therefore

the process of constructing implementing machinery began slowly and proceeded empirically:

the first SSP secretariat, the SSP Unit, started in 1998 with the Assistant Secretary to Cabinet,

and no one else (Rural Secretariat 2005a). This suggests that little forethought was given to the policy instruments needed to make the Plan operational.

Treating the SSPO as a linkage instrument demands focusing on two relationships: those within government and those with the regional SSP committees. It is tempting to see its internal linkage functions as an instance of horizontal management (Peters, 1998; Hopkins, Couture, and Moore 2001) but that may misstate the Office's role. Besides the PCSD and the RSCs, the SSPO did not really manage anything; it could hardly be expected to with so few professional staff. Rather, it appears to have been developing a role as coordinator, a hub that connected the social policy sides of all government departments (SSPO 2003; Rural Secretariat 2005a). From its strategic position within the Executive Council the SSPO was certainly able to access all parts of government and its director, an assistant deputy minister (ADM), could deal directly with the top officials in other departments (Rural Secretariat 2005a). Further, the fact that the SSP itself had the clear support of both the premier and the minister responsible for the Plan strengthened the Office's position.

Nevertheless, it is unclear how effective the SSPO was as a coordinator. It operated for only a few years, and did so in times of fiscal restraint within a public service whose numbers had been dramatically reduced in the preceding years. As well, its permanent head was an Assistant Deputy Minister, leading an agency with very a limited budget, who had to convince Deputy Ministers heading central agencies and big budget line departments to sacrifice some of their autonomy. Further, there is little evidence that bridging the various policy silos of the provincial government had been a priority of cabinet.[10]

More important here is its role dealing with the Plan's Regional Steering Committees. The Strategic Social Plan established six regional committees (Labrador, Cormack-Grenfell,

Central, Eastern, Northeast Avalon, Avalon) which were to be the channels for regional input into social policy and serve as the base for government efforts to support regional social development (GNL 1998: 17-18). The logic of this system meant that the SSPO had to represent government to the regions as well as the regions to the government.

According to a senior official (Rural Secretariat 2005a), much of the Office's work consisted of maintaining contact with the committees. It did this in two ways. First, a representative of the Office usually attended the meetings of the Committees. Second, each RSC had a single administrative officer, the regional planner, paid through the SSPO but formally responsible to the Committee, part of whose job was to liaise with the Office. The SSPO also sought to raise the analytical capacity of the Regional Committees to let them contribute to strategic planning, hiring a full-time researcher to be the in-house consultant to and to conduct workshops with the regional committees. This research function dovetailed with the secretariat's work on the Social Audit and Community Accounts, which have proven useful for planning social development.

Regional Steering Committees

Since the 1980s, the provincial government of Newfoundland and Labrador has established a variety of regional boards. These include Economic Development Boards, Health Institutions Boards, Health and Community Services Boards, regional School Boards, the SSP Regional Steering Committees, and their successors, the Rural Secretariat Regional Councils (Rural Secretariat 2005b). [11] However, the six SSP Regional Steering Committees broke new ground in several ways.

First, they were the key mechanism of the SSP. The Plan (GNL 1998) identified two central functions the RSCs were to perform:

- be implementing mechanisms for the multi-sectoral partnerships the Plan called for (GNL 1998, 17); and
- build partnerships with their region's VCBS to plan for integrated social and economic development (GNL 1998, 18).

However, actually securing multi-sectoral partnerships employed structures that compromised the second objective, as the RSCs were principally composed of *ex oficio* appointments, namely the heads of other regional boards or regional directors of government departments (Table 2). Using *ex oficio* appointments both assured the presence of experts with the capacity to make decisions and restricted opportunities to make partisan appointments. This reinforced the RSCs' identity as policy refineries, places where regional policy elites met and worked together, rather than arenas for partisan conflict. Business, however, was not represented, save through the possible presence of business people as representatives of regional economic development boards.[12]

Table 2: Regional Steering Committee Membership[13]

Organization Type	Number of Members (including alternates)
Municipal government associations	3
Federal government	6
Provincial government	10
Aboriginal associations	5
Voluntary/community based	6
Education	10
Regional economic development	13
Health institutions	8
Other	3
Strategic Social Plan	2
TOTAL	**65**

Source: Calculated by author.

Less obvious but more critical, emphasizing formal, quasi-governmental organizations also assured that voluntary sector groups would be outsiders. In part, this was because they lacked the same kinds of resources that the boards had, but a more important factor was the weak representation (11 percent of the organizations and 10 percent of the members) of this sector on the committees. Although the government's desire to build partnerships probably necessitated working with established boards and having the federal and provincial governments well represented, it undermined the objective of engaging community-based organizations.[14]

Second, the structure of the SSP committees appears to have worked against horizontal collaboration. Rather, departmental representatives tended to stay within their hierarchies and representatives from other boards also worked along known paths (CURA 2005a; 2005b). This is not surprising, as policies are made within departments, not between or among them. Government simply is not structured to facilitate inter-departmental communication, thus what the SSP sought to do went against the system's institutional logic. At best, regional representatives of the various social policy departments were able to meet more frequently, discover they had common interests and problems, and begin building informal ties that might ease future collaboration. However disappointing to the Plan's drafters that may be as an outcome, it is still a positive step.

There may be one partial exception: the Labrador Regional Steering Committee. Labrador actually has its own department, Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs, hence its own minister. Labrador thinks of itself as a distinct region, it has a sense of place, and the issues arising there have led the provincial government to recognize its distinctness. It is thus one of the rare examples of place-based governance and horizontal policy coordination, if not necessarily horizontal policy-making.

Third, the committees controlled few resources (Powers and Locke, 2006b). Besides some money for travelling around its region, an RSC's resources amounted to one employee: a regional planner. Despite the title, the job had little to do with regional planning in the usual sense. Rather, the position entailed working with voluntary sector organizations as an outreach officer, to make the RSC's work better known and to encourage community participation.

Notwithstanding these limitations, interviews with seventeen members of the two RSCs surveyed reported generally positive relations with government (Table 3). The results present an interesting mix of views. Although the respondents felt that the RSCs and SSPO essentially functioned well together, they also criticized specific practices, particularly a lack of administrative support that often made RSC's seek short-term assistance from member organizations to cope. Indicative of a more serious potential dispute was the view, held by three RSC members, that regional work was more important than the SSPO. One even said that the committees guide the SSP (CURA 2005a). When combined with the more widely held view that the RSC set its own priorities, even though guided by the SSP's objectives,[15] it suggests that some saw the committees as a means to promote regional objectives regardless of central government priorities. While this weakened the SSP in the short run, in the longer term strong regional identities could benefit future experiments in regional development.

Table 3. RSC Members Perceptions of Relations with SSPO

Perception	Responses (out of 17)
Good Relationship with SSPO	8
SSP staff at meetings	7
Most contact is through the Planner	5
RSC sets own objectives guided by SSP	5*
Limited administrative support	3
Regional work more important than SSPO	3

Source: CURA (2005a)
*: N=13

Evidence of this is found in the committees' assessment of their internal operations. Twelve respondents reported good rapport among the members, while several went on to comment on the trust that was built within their committees. At this level, the SSP worked well and demonstrated that regional policy elites could work together effectively to plan social policy.

Working with government was one half of a committee's charge; the other half was connecting to communities and the voluntary sector. Overall, the RSCs were not successful in engaging voluntary groups. Only a tenth of the members of the committees studied came from the voluntary sector, and efforts made by the RSCs to bring the VCBS into the process were generally passive: sending invitations to meetings the committee held in different parts of the region or notifying groups of special events. On the whole, the relationship between the committees and the voluntary sector was that of service provider and client (Powers and Locke 2006a, 14-16), with the RSCs helping community groups get financial support for projects.

Unsurprisingly, neither the RSC nor the SSP had much profile with the VCBS or the communities proper. Of the 27 groups in one of the regions that were screened to assess their knowledge of the SSP, 24 (89 percent) had heard of it; 17 (63 percent) knew some of the RSC members in their region; 14 (52 percent) knew nothing of the committee itself; and only 8 (30 percent) had sufficient knowledge of the SSP and the committee to complete interviews (CURA 2005b). Powers and Locke (2006a, 19) suggest that the voluntary, community-based sector was not organized in a way that facilitated collaboration with the RSC.

Although the committees recognized the value of the sector and its activists, the community groups were unable to coordinate their activities, leaving individual organizations to rely on ad hoc, informal means to contact the RSCs. Reflecting on this suggests that the voluntary sector, like government, works within silos. Even if the leaders of voluntary

organizations in small towns are natural community leaders, which need not always be the case,[16] the organizations themselves have different objectives and distinct clienteles. There is no reason why they should work together; indeed, since they compete for donor funds, there can be good reasons not to cooperate, except at a superficial level.

RURAL SECRETARIAT

The successor to the SSP, the Rural Secretariat (RS) began life as a Progressive Conservative (PC) election promise in 2003 (PC 2003). As sketched in the platform, Danny Williams' new program for rural recovery was to adopt the SSP's general aims but not its structures. For example, the RS carried over the notion of working with local and regional partners to build dynamic communities able to control their futures by combining social, cultural and economic factors. However, its goal would be rural and regional development rather than community development, per se; indeed, its focus was exclusively rural, excluding the St. John's metropolitan area as a regional centre housing a planner, although several St. John's citizens serve on the RC for Avalon. As well, it offered a strongly practical orientation, promising to build partnerships between the federal and provincial government to help communities expand their economic bases and raise the competitiveness of local businesses. Finally, the RS would bring together in one place all the information on government program and services available for local development. So where the SSP was oriented toward the VCBS, collaborative governance and a new process for making social policy, the RS was built around more conventional principles of regional economic development. With the PC victory of 2003, the Liberals experiment was on its way to the history books.

However, Premier Danny Williams did not put his new organization to work immediately. Rather, just like the SSP, the inauguration of the Rural Secretariat took time.

Although the PCSD ceased operations as soon as the new government took office, the formation

of the RS was not announced until early 2004, and the regional committees of the SSP continued

operating in a kind of limbo until March 2005. It is only in 2006 that the new RS institutions are

all in place and functioning. There is nothing unusual in a new program taking time to get

started. Frameworks have to be designed, the details of new policies have to be worked out,

various interests have to be consulted and new machinery has to be set in motion. All this takes

time to do well. Still, if we take the five years that passed between the announcement of a

strategic social plan and the publication of the Plan itself and to that add the two years it took the

Rural Secretariat to enter into full functioning, we have seven of the fourteen years that have

passed since 1992.

Structures and Processes

What most clearly distinguishes the RS from the SSP is that the former makes no allusion

to social policy, nor does it speak of the voluntary sector or of civil society more generally. Its

focus is economically sustainable regions where people live in secure, inclusive communities

(Rural Secretariat 2005c, 3). This suggests that Mr. Williams's administration sees the rural

question in Newfoundland and Labrador as being essentially about economic development. In

any event, the change in focus necessitates new structures and processes. The RS's machinery is

still evolving so we can only describe its general outlines and the goals it is to achieve. In brief, it

has a secretariat, effectively the old SSPO with a new name and different duties, nine (9)

regional councils (RSRC) and a provincial council (RSPC).

The regional councils have a different structure from the regional committees. First, all

members of the RSRCs are government appointees, though the public was invited to submit

nominations; there are no *ex oficio* appointments as was the case with the regional steering

committees. The appointees are "women and men who are actively engaged in promoting

entrepreneurial, cultural, environmental and social undertakings in their regions" (Rural Secretariat 2005b, i). Here we also see the shift in emphasis away from VCBS. Presumably the new direction reflected the government's belief that individuals directly involved in community development are those who can contribute most to the search for regional sustainability.

We do not as yet know precisely how the regional committees will function but it is evident that their role will be to advise government on questions relating to regional development. An official of the RS indicated that an important part of the RSRCs' role will be thinking about the problems their regions will face over the next 15 years, as well as how to cope with them successfully. For example, if a community's schools are losing students due to emigration citizens should be thinking about amalgamating their schools with those of other communities (Rural Secretariat 2005a).

With respect to the Provincial Council, again we can as yet only describe its structure. It has representatives of each RSRC, Memorial University, the College of the North Atlantic (a multi-campus technical institute), and other appointees from the community (VCBS, arts, etc.). Twice a year the Provincial Council will meet with cabinet and with the deputy ministers of every department to discuss development problems and priorities. Its principal role will be to advise government regarding economic and social tendencies that could have an impact on provincial development over the next five years. Although the Provincial Council will apparently have less autonomy than did the Premier's Council, it does constitute an improvement on the earlier body because it puts representatives of the regional bodies in direct contact with top government decision makers.

CONCLUSION

It has been over fourteen years since the Newfoundland and Labrador cod fishery collapsed, causing a grave crisis in the rural parts of the province. In that time, two complex program have been put into operation. Yet rural zones keep losing population and most face uncertain economic perspectives. Obviously, it takes time to design and mount sophisticated policies like the Strategic Social Plan and the Rural Secretariat. For that reason, citizens hope to see these tools persist and become institutionalized so that they can be used to confront future crises. Changing a complex program because a new party wins power is costly but it is practically a law of politics: every new administration comes to power with its own strategic vision that it wants to implement. Sometimes such changes are required for ideological reasons or to make the totality of the new government's policies work, but at times it is done simply to distinguish the new administration from its predecessor. In the case at hand, both sets of reasons were probably in play, although the former appear to predominate.

Both the SSP and RS have citizen engagement as a central element of their *raisons d'être*, even though the purposes of that engagement and the mechanisms through which it operates are quite different. In the case of the Rural Secretariat, engagement is more like consultation, whereas the Strategic Social Plan envisaged bringing community-based voluntary organizations into the policy process both to deliver services and to participate in policy formation. It is not yet clear how the RS's system will function or how it will contribute to solving the problems of rural Newfoundland and Labrador. However, we do know that the SSP's linkage structures needed reforms, perhaps fundamental ones, if they were to achieve their stated goals.

The SSP was an exceptionally innovative policy. It broke new ground by seeking to bring community-level voluntary organizations into the policy process, encourage government

departments to think and work more in terms of horizontal collaboration, and develop a place-based approach to social policy built on mobilizing community resources instead of placing all responsibility in government's hands. It achieved none of these objectives, although it did make some progress toward all of them. That result was due to the mix of problems the SSP encountered: lack of time in operation; overly optimistic expectations about what the community-based voluntary sector and communities themselves could do; linkage structures that did not work as expected; and insufficient resources.

It might be argued that the SSP would have fared better if it had incorporated an array of concrete policies aimed a strengthening communities, thereby giving them the tools to do serious planning work. But making those policies effective would have demanded tight inter-departmental coordination, one of the very things the SSP sought to establish. We must remember that the SSP was an initial experiment in setting the foundations for a new style of governing in Newfoundland and Labrador. More importantly, it was the first serious attempt in Canada to reach out to people who do not normally think much about public policy and engage them in its making. To be successful, the SSP demanded a degree of devolution of authority and resources that the government of Newfoundland and Labrador was unable to meet. Nevertheless, valuable lessons were learned about the problems that arise when trying to link government more closely to the voluntary sector, the communities that sector serves and eventually to all citizens.

Turning to the Rural Secretariat, we find a return to a familiar model that makes the provincial and federal governments, not communities and their citizens, the principal agents of change in rural areas. Yet much like the SSP, the Secretariat appears to lack a comprehensive vision of where rural Newfoundland and Labrador should be heading. Neither is there evidence that the Conservative government is committing substantially more resources to the RS than the

Liberals gave to the SSP. In one sense this is surprising, because governmental discourse in the province has always stressed the importance of rural regions and governments have generally been responsive to rural demands, at least in terms of public works and short-term public jobs.[17] Not getting beyond the point of short-term fixes is probably explained by a lack of both resources and alternatives for the development of the province's rural areas. But that is why Newfoundland and Labrador has a rural question in the first place.

Notes

[1] The authors wish to thank Colin Macdonald for his research assistance.

[2] The authors wish to thank Colin Macdonald for his research assistance.

[3] The Plan also featured a special SSP Ministerial Committee, which brought together the Social Policy Committee of Cabinet (Ministers of Education, Health and Community Services, Human Resources and Employment, Justice, Municipal and Provincial Affairs, Environment and Labour, Government Lands and Services, and Tourism, Culture and Recreation) in addition to the Chair of the Economic Policy Committee of Cabinet, the Minister of Finance and President of the Treasury Board, and the Chair of the Cabinet Committee on Rural Revitalization. It was responsible for ensuring implementation of the plan and the creation of mechanisms for interdepartmental decision-making and for informing Cabinet of developments. A lead minister, the Minister of Health and Community Services, was designated and a deputy ministers committee, mirroring the Ministerial Committee, established. Because this was not a mechanism linking government to communities, we do not consider it here.

[4] Parts of the following section are adapted from Close, Rowe, and Wheaton (2003).

[5] Phillips (2001a; 2001b), Brock (2001), and Patten (2001) discuss these questions in the context of national politics.

[6] Parts of the following two sections are adapted from Close, Rowe, and Wheaton (2003). Further information on these linkage mechanisms can be found in Powers and Locke (2006a; 2006b; 2006).

[7] Brian Tobin and Roger Grimes, both Liberals.

[8] These are available at www.communityaccounts.ca.

[9] Some former officials suggest that the SSPO was intended to have a policy development role; i.e., to be Cabinet's "social policy shop." Others saw the Office's role as limited to the more usual task of policy refinement. In any event, the administrative responsibilities of the SSPO absorbed most of its energies.

[10] Dunn (2005) presents material bearing on this question; cf. Dunn (2002).

[11] One can suggest that regionalization had become an institutionalized instrument of public policy in Newfoundland and Labrador by the time the SSP came into being. This implies that governments see regional decentralization as a viable response to many policy problems. The authors thank Stephen Tomblin for this observation.

[12] Several of the 17 RSC members interviewed for the Values Added CURA noted the absence of business organizations (CURA 2005a)

[13] Table 2 reflects the membership of the two RSCs studied in depth the *Values Added* CURA. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the representation of VCBS organizations was no higher on the other committees.

[14] One point that must be made is that there were no reports of conflict or competition between the federal and provincial agencies. That is, neither level of government tried to leverage the other out of the picture by offering greater benefits or more attractive programs to the communities and groups involved.

[15] Only one committee was asked how it had been guided by the SSP's objectives (CURA 2005b).

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[16] The local head of the heart and stroke foundation may not be interested in anything besides collecting funds for his charity, just as the president of a community's softball league need not care about much besides her game. It may even be a mistake to classify these individuals as potential community leaders, as their participation in voluntary activities could as easily be private regarding – it is what they want to do – as public regarding – they do it for the common good. This is a question that merits further study.

[17] In terms of rural development broadly conceived, government's indifferent record has prompted many citizen-run experiments in local development. Unfortunately, these too have produced disappointing results. For details, see Bonia (2006).

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