What Have We Learned?

The Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador: Strengthening Collaborative Approaches to Development

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Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador
and Memorial University

DISCUSSION PAPER
prepared for the
Values Added Symposium

***Innovative Strategies in Government-Community Collaboration:
Voluntary Sector and Citizen Engagement in Public Policy Development***

May 6, 2008
Admiral's Green, St. John's

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Background

Newfoundland and Labrador is an interesting and challenging place for an experiment in participatory social policy development. Similar to other primary resource-based economies with little or no local ownership or control, the province has seldom known steady, long-term prosperity. Until recently, its political culture and institutions have been characterized by hierarchy and deference to political elites, though this is rapidly changing. Municipal institutions are relatively new and fragile and local leadership maybe underdeveloped.

In 1992, three years into the work of the Economic Recovery Commission and after a public consultation to inform its development, the Province released *Change and Challenge: A Strategic Economic Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador*, which reiterated a mid-80's recommendation for "an integrated approach to rural and regional development, having the various agencies and departments of government working together to achieve common objectives".[1] The collapse of the northern cod fishery, also dating from 1992, brought 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 decreases in funding to community groups. Socio-demographic trends such as low birth rate, aging population and high out-migration created additional pressures.

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 by 1985 had called for a long-term strategic plan within the social policy sector, to work in tandem with economic development initiatives.[2]

In the 1993 *Speech From The Throne*, Premier Clyde Wells announced government's intention to create a strategic social plan for the province, as a complement to the Strategic Economic Plan. A strategic social planning group was set up, comprised of deputy ministers, senior officials from social departments and agencies of government, with Dr. Doug House from the Economic Recovery Commission, and Penelope Rowe, of the Community Services Council, representing the voluntary sector.

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[1] Blake, Raymond B. *Regional and Rural Development Strategies in Canada: The Search for Solutions*, Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening our Place in Canada, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, March 2003, p. 206.
[2] CSC briefs to Social Policy Committee of Cabinet.

In 1994, a federal-provincial Task Force on Community Economic Development released *Community Matters: The New Regional Economic Development*, which suggested that local people play the lead role in economic development, with the private sector as the main driver, and a strong supportive and facilitative function for government.[3] The province was subsequently divided into twenty zones, each with a Regional Economic Development Board (REDB) charged with the development of a strategic economic plan for the region. Minister Judy Foote said at the time, "Individuals, communities and groups with an interest in regional economic development have come together - in many areas for the first time - to organize themselves better to coordinate and integrate development efforts… individuals and groups at the local level must take ownership and responsibility for the development process. But if their efforts are to succeed, they need the support of government. This cannot, and will not, take the form of top-down direction, but of a partnership approach."[4] She called it revolutionary.

Interestingly, she went on to say, "These are challenging times for government as well, as we must learn new ways of doing business. Innovation, efficiency and partnership take on real meaning as government departments and agencies strive to maintain or enhance service with fewer resources. Partnerships with the voluntary sector are a key aspect of this."[5] So, by the mid-90's, the concepts of 'decentralized', 'bottom-up' and 'integrated approaches to economic and social development' had become a regular part of the policy discourse in Newfoundland and Labrador, embedded at least within the rhetoric of Government. The fact that such movements had gained momentum in other jurisdictions, Canadian as well as foreign, added legitimacy.

In 1996, Premier Tobin released the *Strategic Social Plan Consultation Paper*. It called for horizontality across departments, but it still addressed issues from the traditional viewpoint of silos.[6] Shortly after that, the Government appointed a Social Policy Advisory Committee (SPAC), representing various non-government organizations, individuals and academia, to carry out public consultation province-wide, write a report and make recommendations. SPAC, which was chaired by the CEO of the Community Services Council, was comprised of fourteen volunteers from various regions, backgrounds and interests. The SPAC report, *Investing in People and Communities*, released after extensive public dialogue, proposed major shifts in Government's approach to policy and practice to establish a framework for social development that acknowledged "the crucial role of individuals and communities in fostering social and economic well-being."[7]

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Keynote address by Judy Foote, Minister of Development and Rural Renewal, delivered to "Your Challenge, Your Future: The St rategic Planning Conference of the New Regional Economic Development", Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1996.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Catmur, A. Unfinished draft of master's thesis.

[7] *Report of the Social Policy Advisory Committee Volume II: Investing in People and* Communities, 1997, p. 4. Queen's Printer, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

SPAC's vision "advocated a move away from the government's traditional way of conducting business. Rather than assigning individual departments with the responsibility of identifying solutions to particular social issues, a more collaborative approach was envisioned. The vertical structure of government in which each department operated as a 'silo', disconnected and often unaware not only of the activities of other departments, but also of the activities of non-governmental actors, was seen as inefficient and inadequate. The lack of communication and coordination - both interdepartmentally and inter-sectorally - contributed to a lack of knowledge regarding overlaps in programming, the existence of unmet needs and gaps, potential complications arising from the interaction of different departmental policies and programs, as well as potential synergies that could arise from greater collaboration. SPAC advocated a more horizontal approach to policy and program development, as well as service delivery, both within government and between government and non-governmental actors."[8] Government announced in 1997 that it accepted, in principle, the SPAC report.

By 1998, *People, Partners and Prosperity: A Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador* (SSP) was released by Government. 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. A sweeping, highly transformative document, the SSP was designed to both address current social and economic development needs and anticipate and respond to new challenges as they arose at community and regional levels. Created with broad goals and objectives, the Strategic Social Plan (SSP) would encompass health care, education, environment, employment, justice, culture, recreation, housing, income support and other social programs. By integrating social development with economic development while emphasizing a 'bottom up' deliberative process, the government hoped to apply a place-based approach to social programming.

What Was The SSP?

The vision behind the SSP was very different from the traditional remedial model of rigid programs and separate departmental jurisdictions. Services would be delivered within the context of the needs of communities and the needs of people living in those communities. Interventions and investments in people would be tied to social and economic development efforts at the local level, and program flexibility would allow responses to fit the needs of clients in different places and different circumstances.

The SSP rationale was as follows:

"Government and other service providers have tended to focus programs on

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[8] Ibid.

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delivering services to individuals, often in isolation from the larger context in which they live. This approach does not consider the many factors which may be contributing to these problems, nor does it consider opportunities which may exist within particular regions and communities for solving them.

Shifting social-development to a place-based approach will help to integrate social and economic development by matching social investment with current community and region-based development approaches. This will shift the focus from treating individual problems to addressing the underlying causes of those problems by considering people's needs in the context of their communities and their socio-economic environment.[9]"

Four goals were articulated:

➢ 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[10]

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 business. The clear emphasis was upon a fundamental process to strengthen social planning and make services more responsive to the needs of people within the context of the circumstances in their communities.

It was recognised that implementation of such a broad-based platform would entail something of a sea change in the way social programs were delivered. Voluntary organisations were considered crucial to the process, as was the breaking down of barriers between different government agencies and departments. The Plan called for more coordination and integration within government through the development of partnerships among departments, in regions and within the voluntary community-based sector. With a single coherent policy and program re-alignment in place, one department would not be undermining the efforts of another. Community-based voluntary organisations, with their sometimes greater knowledge of the needs of particular population groups, regions and communities, would have real input into public policy and program development.

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[9] *People, Partners and Prosperity: A Strategic Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador*, 1998, p. 8
[10] Ibid. p. 23

SSP Implementation Mechanisms

To implement the SSP, Government established three complementary apparatuses designed to facilitate interdepartmental collaboration, public consultation and citizen engagement in the policy-making process, and to link voluntary organizations and communities more directly to government. These were:

The Premier's Council on Social Development (PCSD). Government's first step in implementing the SSP 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. It conducted research, assessed social policies and programs, held roundtable discussions, and established ad hoc committees to study social issues. The Council had 18 members, the majority from the voluntary, community-based and social (e.g., health and education) sectors, along with members from the business and 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 when giving advice on provincial directions for social development. 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. Members were not 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, presented a report describing how its activities influenced social policy in general and the SSP in particular.

Strategic Social Plan Regional Steering Committees. An SSP Committee was established in each of six regions: Labrador, Western, Central, Eastern, Avalon and Northeast Avalon. It was made up of existing regional boards including health institution boards, health and community service boards, school boards and regional economic development boards as well as other community partners such as municipalities, voluntary community-based groups and provincial and federal government direct service providers. Members, most of whom had leadership roles in their own organisations, were expected to play a leadership role within the community as well. The purpose of the SSP Committees was to:

➢ Deliver services to better meet the needs of people and communities
➢ Coordinate initiatives and integrate social and economic investments
➢ Articulate regional needs to government for the purposes of formulating policy and subsequent program development.

Strategic Social Plan Office (SSPO). The SSPO was placed within Executive Council and headed by an assistant deputy minister. It was designed to be the interface between the government and the SSP Committees. It was expected to both represent government to the regions and the regions to government. It provided each region with a regional planner who was

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responsible to the SSP Committee.

The Strategic Social Plan operated from 2000 until 2004 when, under a new administration, Premier Danny Williams replaced it by creating the Rural Secretariat. Looking back over the course of its existence, the SSP can be viewed as a single jurisdiction's attempt to achieve collaboration and integrated social and economic development in regions and communities.

The Rural Secretariat

The Rural Secretariat builds on the foundation of the SSP but adopts a different approach to citizen and community engagement. With nine Regional Councils and a Provincial Council, it focuses more on advancing sustainable development and is intended to create vehicles for government and citizens to work cooperatively to develop solutions to the challenges and opportunities that face rural areas.

The overriding mandate of the Rural Secretariat is to act as a focal point for government to work with local and regional partners to build strong dynamic regions. All participants outside government come to the process as volunteers. Key objectives are to advance cooperation through the sharing of information and discussion about economic and social measures, and to encourage government and community partners to take action.

The *Values Added* Community University Research Alliance (CURA)

Values Added Community University Research Alliance (CURA) was a partnership of researchers from the Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador and Memorial University of Newfoundland. It was designed to explore the new approach to social development that began with the release of the SSP from the perspectives of academic learning, community-based planning and policy development.

In 2003-2004 *Values Added* CURA conducted a series of interviews with members of SSP Committees, regional planners, members of community-based voluntary organisations, and members of leadership teams that had been established in some localities in one region. Focus groups of representatives from community-based voluntary organizations were also held in three localities.

The purpose of the research was to:

➢ Determine the voluntary sector's engagement in regional SSP multi-sector

partnerships
- ➢ Identify opportunities and challenges in regional, multi-sector partnerships
- ➢ Explore collaborative models for the voluntary, community-based sector to become involved in a partnership approach to policy dialogue, program design and service delivery
- ➢ Investigate citizen engagement in community development within the SSP framework
- ➢ Examine the horizontal management of the SSP, both in the regions and at the central level of government.

Further research was also carried with voluntary sector organizations across the province which identified key issues and restraints being faced by the sector. These included recruitment and retention and the need for training and proposed a framework for supporting community leadership.[11]

Research Findings

SSP Committees. The Regional Committee members interviewed generally believed they had been given sufficient tools and resources to achieve their mandate. Some of the strengths of the SSP Committees included:
- ➢ Greater strength than boards and departments would have had alone, as most regional social and economic development funds flowed through member organisations
- ➢ Bureaucracies in regions were able to engage communities to some extent
- ➢ Increased collaboration across sectors in some cases allowed more integrated responses to clients, communities and regions; barriers between organisations were reduced
- ➢ Program delivery was somewhat more flexible than was possible for individual organisations
- ➢ More trust was developed amongst agencies, departments and organisations as well as greater awareness of each other's goals, programs and initiatives.

Voluntary Sector. The SSP was a popular document with the voluntary, community-based sector when it was first released. It represented the government's formal recognition of the sector and its importance in social development and the pursuit of community and population well being. In fact, it was acknowledged that social change could not be implemented successfully without the involvement of community groups. SSP Committee members agreed that the concept of involving the voluntary, community-based sector would lead to a better grasp of both problems and solutions within the community.

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[11] Leadership Gap: Perception or Reality? Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador, 2002.
   Pan Provincial Survey, Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador, 2002

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Four aspects of the SSP were considered most relevant by voluntary sector organizations interviewed. These were:

➢ Encouragement of social and economic development to increase well-being
➢ Prevention and early intervention
➢ Partnerships with communities and organisations
➢ Reducing duplication of services and filling gaps in communities

The groups interviewed believed they themselves were working towards these priorities, both generally and in specific areas such as recreation, community development, health and wellness, improved quality of life, human resource development, education, community safety and security.

In the short life of the SSP, there was a general lack of awareness in the community about the SSP, the implementation structures and the regional committees. However, those community group representatives who were knowledgeable enough to be interviewed felt that the SSP Committee had made a difference in the region and appreciated the work of the regional planner. They cited several examples of programs and services that had improved. Amongst other things they felt there was more information available, they were able to access higher levels of training and funding, new initiatives had been moved forward, and the region was being looked at as a whole.

Engaging the Voluntary Sector and Citizens. It was difficult to engage the community to the extent envisioned in the SSP. Though the SSP was committed to establishing a specific partnership role for the voluntary community-based sector, neither politicians, high level civil servants, community groups nor community leaders had a strong grasp of what the SSP was, or what the role of the SSP Committee was supposed to be. Attempts by SSP Committees to engage community groups were passive or indirect.

The same held true for citizens. In one region an attempt was made to establish formal structures to engage ordinary citizens. Leadership teams were organized to undertake broad-based planning and implement initiatives in two localities. But the team members had no membership on the SSP Committee and thus had no formal input into regional decision-making.

Often community groups and citizens became aware of the SSP through public meetings and events. A few organizations were asked to become members of the SSP Committees, but there were no mechanisms in place by which these individuals could report back to the rest of the voluntary organisations in the regions. It was also difficult for the voluntary sector to provide integrated advice to the SSP Committees as very few community-based collaborative structures existed. Collaborative efforts among community groups are for the most part restricted to local events or specific constituencies such as, for example, literacy, women's groups and violence prevention. In other words, they operate within their own silos. Organizations often related to the

SSP committee through established relationships with committee members, rather than through communication with the committee directly.

However, organizational representatives were eager to be involved and to help achieve the goals of the SSP when they understood what the SSP was trying to accomplish and when they saw those goals as synonymous with their own. Participants in three focus groups who were asked to discuss a collaborative model for sector dialogue with government produced remarkably similar recommendations. A framework for dialogue and policy input, they said, needs to start with communication within the sector and should serve multiple purposes. These are to:

➢ Enable the sector to identify issues of common concern
➢ Bring issues and recommendations forward to government in a coordinated way
➢ Help to address other challenges and capacity issues through increased sharing of information, best practices and resources.

Because the voluntary, community-based sector had little knowledge of SSP processes and the role laid out for it, it continued to operate within its own distinct domains of interest. The relationship between SSP Committees and the sector continued to be one of service provider to client rather than a partnership.

SSP Committees and Policy Advice to Government. Although the SSP had defined a role for the SSP Committees to advise government on policies that affected regional development, this component of the plan remained unrealized. SSP Committees were mainly comprised of service delivery organizations that focused on programs rather that broad regional development policy. In addition, government had no mechanism in place to consult directly with the SSP Committees on policy or program recommendations, and did not do so. As a consequence, programs and services were not re-aligned so that goals and parameters met place-based needs. The absence of the voluntary sector as a partner also meant that departments and boards maintained their silo-oriented approach to policy advice, as did the sector through its provincial organizations.

Horizontal Approach Within Government. The SSP promoted a horizontal management approach within government. However, there were few civil service 'champions', and there was resistance within the entrenched bureaucracy. As a result, government continued to operate in a hierarchical silo system organized by domains of interest such as health, justice, education, etc. Some efforts were made to integrate approaches across departments but generally on provincial policy development rather than policies, programs and services that were designed to respond to regional needs. A horizontal mechanism to hear, understand and respond to a place-based request was absent. Regional agencies continued to relate to government in traditional ways, e.g., the school board to the Department of Education, etc.

The SSP was an experimental process which in its short term had little time to grow,

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learn and develop. Nevertheless, several lessons learned from its implementation processes may contribute to current and future endeavours to institute integrated, community-based development strategies.

Lessons Learned

Linking Mechanisms. A comprehensive understanding and will at the uppermost levels of government of what place-based collaborative governance is and what it requires is essential to the implementation of a place-based development approach. This understanding is also needed at the community level. Bureaucrats, politicians and community members must share a similar vision. Regional and community input needs a vehicle to reach the highest levels, and government must have a mechanism in place to be able to act on policy and program advice generated at the regional and community level. Unfortunately, few of these requirements were met. Where some progress might have been occurring, the change in government and the morphing of the SSP into a less transformative agency – the Rural Secretariat – further undermined these needed changes.

> ### Keys to Success
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> Linking mechanisms
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> Voluntary sector engagement
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> Resources
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> Access to information
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> Program flexibility
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> Longevity

Voluntary Sector Engagement. Involving voluntary, community-based organizations and citizens is essential. There must be a constant and sustained reaching out to people and groups at the grassroots level to promote networking, capacity building, skills development and more autonomy on the front lines. As indicated, neither the time, resources nor knowledge of how to accomplish this existed within the SSP.

Resources. Human and financial resources are needed at all levels to build networks, skills and organisational capacity, and to facilitate and maintain collaboration. Dedicated staff are required to provide support and coordination, maintain momentum, maximize voluntary contributions and fill other core roles. Long term funding needs to be available to promote sustained, uninterrupted programming and interactions. Once again, the lack of adequate resources greatly curtailed SSP efforts.

Access to Information and Opportunities. There is a perception in at least some rural and remote areas that opportunities are being missed due to a lack of awareness of existing resources such as training, volunteer supports, funding information, public sector programs, regulations and opportunities, etc. Information and opportunities must be accessible to level the playing field, encourage inclusive collaborative efforts, save time and avoid duplication.

Program Flexibility. Programs needed to incorporate flexibility to enable them to respond to different priorities and issues in different places. Such flexibility requires changes in attitude and structure within government institutions.

Longevity. Building the necessary skills, resources and linking mechanisms is a long-term commitment. Unfortunately, political change often results in the dismantling or transformation of previous initiatives.

Conclusion

Implementation. There is an enormous difference between having vision, getting those good ideas, new structures and innovative approaches on paper, and designing methods to action the vision. The complexity of implementing a strategy like the SSP requires significant resources and buy-in, time and effort, commitment at all levels and a willingness to learn by trial and error, adapt and continue. 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).[12] Eric Leviten-Reid (2006) concurs, describing a process constantly in beta testing mode, trying out things and adjusting.[13]

Newfoundland and Labrador had a comprehensive plan, though vague in certain respects, but little capacity to implement. Effective collaboration requires the development of connections on several levels, and community-based solutions require an inclusive, 'bottom up' approach. The building of linkages within communities, across silos within the voluntary sector, and across clusters of communities with a regional governance structure like the SSP committees, and from there to the upper echelons of government needs committed financial and human resources over an extended period. Political and bureaucratic understanding as well as will at the highest levels, including the means to listen and to act, are all required for success. Perhaps because of the newness and the transformative nature of the SSP, such resources were seldom available. 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.

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[12] Paquet, Gilles. The governance of sustainability: a social learning approach, revised version of the inaugural address to the First National Capital Colloquium on the Governance of Sustainable Development, 2004, pp. 17-18.
[13] Leviten-Reid, E. Asset-based, Resident-led Neighbourhood Development, The Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2006, p. 7.

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