COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Out from the margins

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What I have discovered in all my travels is that the issues that rural people are addressing are similar. Presently in the Atlantic region of Canada people, communities and governments are addressing:

- rural decline (in Canada only 15% live in rural environs in the Atlantic region it is 35-45%)

- influences by newcomers (lifestyle movers)

- youth unemployment and disillusionment

- redundancies among middle aged workers

- diminishing local autonomy

- political rhetoric but, little policy support

- impacts from technological advances (both good and bad)

- government restructuring/role analysis

I would suggest that other marginalised communities (i.e. inner cities, disadvantaged groups, etc.) are experiencing impacts from these same issues.

Yet, we happen to be living in one of the most interesting periods in human history. Societal shifts, unlike any witnessed before because of their scope, are testing and stretching our ability to comprehend either the problems or their solutions. Indeed, similar to our ancestors in more ancient societies, people have gravitated to the supposed wisdom of a variety of ' gurus' just as those in other eras fell prey to medicine men or witch doctors.

Instability, friction and social upheaval are evident everywhere. The resulting quagmire is generating negative forces, some being unleashed by senior governments, others as a means to keep control of people and their grass roots movements. The belief is that a negative environment will develop fear and suppress a very human element of expression - the protest. It is not working, as we look around at the people actions that are happening, and it never has. Aspirations and desires eventually overcome fear.

Twice during this century, other generations experienced the precursor of the change we now appear unable to avoid.   The economic depression of the thirties and the social revolution of the sixties challenged established concepts and institutions. Processes that were utilised in working in the margins of those times became adopted as mainstream endeavours. Especially, as the significant challenges were eventually being experienced by those more in the mainstream of society. It was only when the economic and social impacts were felt outside the margins that such activities were encouraged. Only then, were forms of community development allowed to surface which brought to the fore the potential of people when they coalesce around issues.

One real difference in the nineties is the evolution of the range of volunteer and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's). These structures are operating within communities offering support, services and alternate economic opportunities and social mechanisms. In many cases because of their dependence on government or community support they have become competing entities and have lost sight of their original and real role. Often, they forget the context of community accountability and become accountable to themselves, their boards or their affiliates nationally and

internationally. Yes, many end up as part of the problem vying for whatever favour they can access and whatever support they can harness, spending the greater portion of their time and energy supporting themselves. While, the real work of community development is left wanting.

The nineties brings us to another similar but, profound juncture, as in the thirties and sixties, once again, the impacts of technological advancement begins to impact those further up the chain in society. Local initiative and involvement are again being espoused as the route forward.   Similarly, as in other times, I would suggest, it provides those that would advocate authority a release from their responsibility, as they promote more local control, devolution and individual responsibility. By enunciating decentralisation, more senior governments can deflect accountability yet, retain their position of power. But, with all this posturing will real community building be allowed. Or, as in the previous eras when the crisis was past will it be relegated back to the margins. Will community development be recognised as a continuum, or will it stay the perceived medium of retrenchment during periods of dramatic or rapid change, utilised by those in power when their own solutions are found wanting? We could even ask - is it even possible for humans who gain perceived advantage to share that advantage with others?

Which brings me to my real challenge - that of providing a context and concept of Community Development, a concept, that I would suggest, is as old as humankind.

Personally, I believe that the essence of community is about feelings. Feelings emanate from knowing and knowing comes from awareness. The more that we

become aware of our environment, our circumstance and those who share the world with us, the more our knowledge grows. Expanded knowledge creates stronger feelings, deeper relationships, an enhanced sense of our inter-connectivity resulting in stronger communities.

Terms such as awareness and knowledge are the language of education and that is why, I believe, education and development are intrinsic. The interrelationship of education to community development in both the thirties and sixties suggests that. Thus the focus for development, education and community must ultimately be on people and their inherent talents, capabilities, needs and ambitions.

In Nova Scotia in the thirties the community development charge was led by two priests under the banner of adult education. They recognised that the dilemma being experienced was a human issue. They felt the despair being experienced had more to do with fear of change and cultural entrenchment than economic or social disparity. They recognised that for real change to be effective people must become " masters of their own destinies" a phrase synonymous with what became known as the "Antigonish Movement" in Nova Scotia and many parts of the developing world. A movement that introduced co-operatives and credit unions to the Atlantic Region of Canada. To address the despair and unlock the fears and natural talents of local people, one of the two partners suggested that " ***mass rallies were held to explode intellectual dynamite to shatter the old mind sets that had become encrusted with tradition***".

They acknowledged *that we in the Antigonish movement were not so much concerned with setting the yard limits of adult education as we were with throwing the switches which would give the average person unobstructed passages to wider fields of knowledge, self help and security* ". A similar concept as we now call entrepreneurship. They realised that the solution lay within local people not institutionalised support. They argued that " *there was more real adult education taking place at the pit heads, down in the mines, out among the fisherman's shacks, along the wharves and in the kitchens and wherever you can get the farmers and their wives to gather and sit and talk in the evenings, than you can get from one hundred thousand dollars' worth of fossilised formal courses. It springs from the hearts and pain of people* ". I believe that we are now once more experiencing the pain of change. The current challenge of community development is to reach the hearts of people.

It is my contention that community begins when two people share. The sharing is what creates the economy, and subsequently, lifestyle. Development is neither the beginning or the end; it is the process and the measure of our ability to share. It relates to people, their aspirations, their dreams and, fundamentally, their own efforts to bring these to reality. Thus each sharing is a new beginning, new development and a new reality.

Development, I would argue is not something that can be delivered either in the form of programs, grants or infrastructure as governments have attempted. It has been demonstrated that money and organisational support in themselves are not the solution for rural and other marginalised communities. The real challenges, as Coady and his colleagues in the Thirties and Schumacher, of "Small is Beautiful" distinction, in the

sixties recognised, are human issues that could be alleviated with more feelings, better knowledge and more willingness by those at the top and those at the bottom to confer - to communicate and then to act. That is why I posed the question "is it possible for people who gain perceived advantage to risk that for the betterment of others". There are many examples, such as the two mentioned, that can demonstrate that it is. But, in this current crisis we will first have to break the "rigid mindset" of scarcity that has been created, that somehow there is not enough - time, money, resources, work, etc,.

The real challenge for the nineties and beyond is the encouragement of people participation, thus providing forums for legitimising their own talents, skills and beliefs. The next step is to devise methodologies that support the growing milieu of individuals and organisations who are pursuing local and personal interests so that society is improved and enhanced - **the real purpose of development**. Initiatives must focus on linking people, often those with disparate interests, so that real communications can take place and the legitimacy of those disparate interests will be recognised and an understanding achieved.

Therefore I would suggest that the real challenges for those in community development includes

- animating people in communities - generating interest

- building local confidence

- sharing information

- facilitating an appreciation common values leading to common vision

- identifying those who live in our communities - their skills, talents and interests

- developing community organisations with a local focus not one of government programs

- devising more accessible and flexible funding sources

- creating local investment mechanisms to allow participation in wealth distribution

When I first arrived in Grampian, there was much discussion with regard to what "kit" would I need for my work. Others had sought special computer equipment, mobile telephones, fax machines and other modern trinkets of technology. Yes, I have utilised all this technology and others even more advanced, such as, satellite and television telecommunications and community theatre in my work. But, I questioned the need for such a "kit" to do the work for which I was contracted within communities in the Grampian region. (Preferring to fall back to my considerable scrounging talents to utilise such equipment where and when I could find it. Partially, because that is how it was when initially I got entwined in this passion and because it is how most involved at the community level have to operate.)

My own analysis of a kit for community development would include the following

- patience

- understanding

- empathy/sympathy (sometimes empathy is hardly enough)

- respect

- humility

- kindness/warmth

- tenderness ("few are tough enough to be soft")

- tenacity/firmness

- honesty

- aspirations not ambitions

Obviously tools in any kit are only useful if there is developed skills that allow them to be utilised beneficially. These skills should include

- listening

- facilitating

- research/analysis

- juggling (schedules not things)

Obviously, money, organisation, structure and modern technology including the Internet are tools beneficial to facilitating any process. Community development is no different. Yet, oftentimes these very tools become the inhibitors rather than the enablers. They become obstacles and impediments because of their cost, their ability to absorb time and the competition that evolves from their ability to enhance the EGOS of those involved (often resulting from the most human want to be in control, as if control were the reason d'être for their being or for that matter for development).

Realisation is dawning that development for its own sake has little purpose, is destructive and really doesn't satisfy people's needs or fill the voids they are experiencing. This realisation has resulted in disillusionment, despair and anguish.

The fear of not knowing who they are, where they fit or the direction of society has become a compelling passion for most.

It is my belief that development is a happening that emanates from people who are aware, educated and who understand their own environment, and most importantly today, the external more global scene. Thus, the focus, as suggested earlier, of development, education and community must ultimately be on people and their inherent talents, capabilities, needs and ambitions.