Innovation in Action:
Stories of Social Sector Success

INTRODUCTION

The non-profit social sector in the Columbia Basin-Boundary plays a significant role in the socio-economic well-being of residents, communities, and the region as a whole. Sustaining non-profits, however, has become increasingly challenging, and is demanding new ways of thinking and working. The *Exploring Characteristics and Capacity of the Non-Profit Social Sector in the Columbia Basin-Boundary Region* research project was designed to explore organizational capacity, collaboration, and innovation within the region's non-profit social sector. This research is a critical first step towards enabling evidence-based decision-making by our regions' colleges, funders, and non-profits in efforts related to strengthening this important sector.

The RDI conducted research on social non-profits across our region including a survey of 88 organizations which highlights the characteristics, capacity, and challenges these groups face. Follow up key informant interviews were conducted to explore so-cial innovation, and a series of focus groups solicited ideas to strengthen the social sector and improve social well-being in our communities and region. This Research Brief provides a summary of the results from the interviews conducted. Visit the non-profit social sector research page[1] for other research results and information related to this project.

METHODOLOGY

This research project was developed and implemented in consultation with the RDI's Social Research Advisory Committee, a group of social sector representatives from across the region.

Following the online survey of social non-profits in spring/summer 2015, potential key informants were identified, starting with recommendations from our advisory committee and then following a snowball sampling technique. Eight individuals from the social sector within the Columbia Basin-Boundary region and rural British Columbia were interviewed in fall to late 2015 and early 2016. All interviewees had been

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in leadership roles related to a social innovation initiatives. The interview was semi-structured, including the following questions as a guide:

1. Why did you innovate?

2. What were the outcomes?

3. What made it successful?

4. What did you learn?

5. How can this idea become common practice?

6. Who else should I speak with?

Participants were provided with the above questions one week in advance of the interview. Interviews were conducted face-to-face where possible, or otherwise by telephone, and audio recorded. Data analysis employed grounded theory to identify common themes and key insights.

INTERVIEW RESULTS

WHY INNOVATE?

There are several factors that can contribute to why organizations innovate. *Organizational threats* were one of the main themes that emerged from the interviews. Threats can include loss of funding and capacity, and the security of the organization or sector as a whole. As one interviewee noted, "we were under threat, as a group of organizations, under threat of an extreme loss of funding and real withdrawal of our service capacity… when the government made some huge cuts". Innovation signals a change in the way groups are operating. "We need[ed] to stand up and stand together and create a safety net for ourselves so that we could continue to have capacity to serve the region". Threats are also related to *growing social issues* and the external socio-economic pressures that communities may face. Social innovation is thus part of a larger community development process, as one interviewee explained. In our region, this often requires adapting a model made for an urban setting to our rural context.

Several interviewees stated that innovation is equal to *evolution*. "Everything must evolve, one way or another" and "non-profits have to evolve around the community". Innovation is equated with *survival*, and with *success*. "You always have to be innovative to be successful. To just keep doing the same old same old, doesn't seem to work, especially in a small town." Innovation is about *staying relevant,*

and *continuous quality improvement*. Interviewees were motivated to innovate by a desire to improve service delivery to ensure the best client experience.

Innovation is also about *efficiencies*. As one interviewee said, by "being innovative you are able to stretch your dollars". Groups are "thinly stretched" so working together allows for meeting shared needs and *achieving greater results*. Working together allows people to "pool money and resources". Innovation was likened to collaboration by several interviewees.

Another factor why groups innovate is that people are genuinely *interested in working together*. There is an understanding of the benefits of innovation and collaboration and the opportunity to learn from one another and improve outcomes. Often it is the people and organizations who are curious and studious, and have the interest and skills to bring people together who will be leaders in such efforts.

WHAT MAKES INNOVATION SUCCESSFUL?

Interviewees were asked about what made their innovation successful and what they learned from the process. There were several themes and key insights that emerged from the interviews that can be helpful for any group seeking to ensure a successful innovation.

One of the most common comments was that *innovation requires people who are committed*. One interviewee said their innovative project was successful because of "the particular individuals at that time". You need "people who are committed" and "people who care". They must be confident and passionate, and have a readiness and willingness to do things differently. This often requires *good leadership*. "In any case study, you need to have a champion".

A related theme is having the *capacity* to pursue the idea. Capacity comes in different forms, including *human resources*. According to interviewees, success arises by empowering people and building on their strengths. An important contributor to success is having *highly capable staff* who can coordinate the work. Interviewees remarked that having the same staff over a period of time greatly helps as innovation is a process of evolution that takes time. That *consistent person* can be critical in a collaboration, and if/when that central person changes, it can make or break the initiative. In some cases, *coor-*

dination was shared across a group of people. A shared management approach appears to be an emerging model for leadership of innovation and collaboration in the social sector and was fundamental to some of the projects described during the interviews. We had a "high functioning team", said one interviewee, which allowed the innovation to flourish.

Capacity is also about *financial resources*, as noted by most interviewees. Seed funding is often required, as well as core on-going resources for coordination. For several groups it was a partnership or co-operative approach that allowed for the sustainability of the initiative.

These collaborative approaches however required *appropriate scope and structure* to be fruitful. The scope must be appropriate to the available capacity and geographic scale. There must be a clear goal and plan, and the timing needs to be right. When considering the appropriate structure, several models were mentioned including creating a co-operative of organizations, partnering with local government, embedding within local government, and using a backbone organization to coordinate multiple participants. Regardless of the collaborative approach, several aspects related to *good governance* were mentioned, including ensuring clear guidelines on roles and responsibilities and leadership and control, having protocols for operations, and in many cases, legal agreements in place.

With innovation closely associated with collaboration for most interviewees, there was significant mention of *building relationships* and working together. "You work better by working together". For innovation to be successful "you can't be a lone ranger". "If you have a bright idea, and you keep it to yourself, it probably won't get off the ground". One interviewee explained that they had "worked hard to build relationships". Another said "we understood reciprocity", while others noted the importance of *inclusivity*. Building relationships, *trust*, and a strong network are foundational to collaborative work. We "built relationships… and strengthened that interagency relationship… by bringing the key stakeholders… together again and again and again to work on different things… and so we're all in this together… let's work on this together". Successful innovation entails *bringing people together* around an idea. It means engaging the organization's staff

and board of directors, and including community groups in the conversation, as noted by several interviewees. "What I have learned is if you have an idea, put it out there, and test it, and put it through the wringer and then if it's going to work you'll know before you start throwing money at it… get input, get input, get input, it's so important". Most interviewees noted that *doing research, sharing information, and learning from others* was key to their success.

Working together is not always intuitive though. Sometimes people need to be convinced of the benefits. Often groups are set in a competitive environment because of current funding models. For one interviewee, the innovation "stabilized the marketplace" because it turned groups who were competitors into collaborators. For some, involvement of key players came through an assessment of the potential results of working together. If people can understand and appreciate the probable outcomes, they are more likely to be on board. Having a *common vision and purpose*, and bringing the issue down to the community's "shared values" is often an important part of the process.

Bringing people together relates to another theme that emerged which is that *innovation is place based*; it is set in the context of the community and must be relevant and important. "If [the] community is not behind it, there's no point in doing it". "Social service needs arise in geographic places… They are not in the person. They arrive in a physical place and so the solution has to be in that physical place". There is no cookie cutter approach, as one interviewee pronounced. Another remarked that "it's naïve to believe that these top down structures and policies in particular are in any way having any effect on rural people". There is significant *difference between the urban and rural* context, which must be recognized and respected. In our rural communities, innovation is "always ground up", said one interviewee. Two others noted the importance of a "shared theory of change" – where people take the time to think about how change will occur, and consider what will happen as a result of the work being done before embarking on the innovation.

Another element of success mentioned by a few interviewees is taking a *systems thinking approach*. Innovation requires setting the idea into context, and understanding the whole system and the many

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dynamics that have influence and impact. As one interviewee noted, social and economic integrity are intertwined, and ultimately all connected to the process of community development. Having a *broad mandate* was also noted because it allows for multiple groups to be involved, and facilitates for various opportunities. Innovation is often about *seizing opportunities*.

A final word of advice from those involved in social innovation initiatives is that sometimes you need to take a "leap of faith". Do not be afraid to take risks and learn from mistakes, and for some, it seems that "social innovation takes magic – an unbelievable streak of luck, good timing, and political support".

CREATING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION

During the interviews, participants were asked about how innovation can become common practice – essentially how to foster a culture of innovation within organizations and communities. There were several suggestions offered.

The most common suggestion was *relationship building*. "Everything is about relationships," said one interviewee. "So much is about trust". "Trust is the foundation. If you build it, you'll see turf recede over time". Relationship building needs to occur within an organization, such as among board and staff, as well as across organizations. *Good communication and meeting regularly* were associated common themes. People and groups must get together to share and discuss their goals, needs, plans, and activities. Bringing people together allows for *knowledge sharing* and ensuring that nobody is "reinventing the wheel", a concern expressed by two interviewees. Through building trust and relationships, and sharing ideas, a collaborative can then create a plan for the best approach and use of funds available.

Most interviewees also stressed the importance of solidifying working relationships through *formal agreements.* "You need to build relationships with individuals and work with them to create changes and then you also need to write it into… policies, and change the culture of organizations, which also includes changing the written documents". Establishing a shared understanding of how groups will work together is essential. Embedding this into formal structures ensures resilience and accommodates for changeover in personnel.

Almost all interviewees also noted that creating a culture of innovation requires the "right personalities". "It requires a group of people who get it". *People need to be ready, and make it a priority.* Operating in a generally competitive environment because of funding models, people need to understand that "collaboration makes us stronger". Interviewees commented on different collaboration experiences – some being fortunate to have a strong group who believed in innovation and working together, with others needing to take the time to convince people about the advantages. It took some time in "helping people to see the benefits, not just for the clients, but also for them." It required explaining and demonstrating that "when people work together they are part of something; they are not working in isolation which can make it a lot more satisfying and meaningful work, [and] not so overwhelming and isolating". Another interviewee noted that "you need buy in from the front line people who are doing the work but you also need buy in from their managers and their organizations to support them to do their work differently". This circles back to the comments related to good communication and relationship building both within and between organizations. It also connects to one interviewee's comment about ensuring a *positive work environment* and *investing in staff*. Human resources are often an organization's biggest asset.

Most interviewees suggested identifying and staying focused on a common vision as a way to foster a culture of innovation. Having a *long term outlook* and a *broad vision* allows for the shared values to emerge and can connect people across sectors. The process sometimes requires bridging geographies in our large rural regions, and *addressing the barriers and challenges* to creating social change. It also means being able to *organize* the many groups to create alignment and focus. One interviewee suggested mapping what organizations are doing – have them self-identify how they can each contribute to the overall health of the community and then they can talk about "what kind of outputs, and more importantly outcomes, do we expect to be achieving together". This can "help them see where they fit in".

A key player in the process of creating a culture of innovation that interviewees remarked on was funders. "Funders have a long way to go" said one interviewee. Most of the barriers and challenges are

about resourcing. *Funders need to change their approach* to foster innovation and collaboration, and recognize that these take resources to be successful. One interviewee explained the importance of a systems approach, and that funders need to see the big picture of how change is happening, what the outcomes and roles of each group are, and understand evaluation so that progress can be assessed.

As one interviewee noted though, "it's hard to create cultural change". Innovation requires a *shift in thinking*, and cultural change frequently comes only through crisis or politics. "You are working on change on so many different levels and fronts" said one interviewee. "Integration is hard", and there can be a fear of losing identity and a fear of change, but as another interviewee remarked, "don't be afraid to merge and to transfer assets". Innovation and collaboration are about *sharing resources* and sometimes that means folding groups and projects into fewer entities. Another interviewee noted that there are already too many distinct groups, even in our small rural towns. Another commented that we "shouldn't be looking at this as individual organizational preservation, but rather our communities, and having the full spectrum of services in all communities". It is about the shared goal of improved social well-being and a strong social sector to deliver the needed services. The innovation process is not always simple, is often *incremental*, and *takes time*. "Collaboration is never done" said one interviewee. Another said, "I learned that collaboration and changing practice takes a lot of time and patience". Creating a culture of innovation requires *continuous learning*, sharing, and adapting. If you can show success, then build on it, and "prove that it works". With each thriving project an appreciation builds, and a culture that embraces innovation develops.

STORIES OF INNOVATION

There are several examples of innovation across the Columbia-Basin Boundary region. While not a comprehensive list, highlighted here are a few stories of success within the social sector. For a list and map of social sector organizations across the Columbia Basin-Boundary please see the [inventory](#)[2] on the RDI's Digital Basin

Kootenay Boundary Community Services Cooperative is one of the first regional social service cooperatives in Canada. Its 14 members are community-based, non-profit, social service organizations operating throughout the West and East Kootenays and Boundary regions. Members work in collaboration to support and strengthen the capacity of each agency, to plan and deliver service innovations and projects, and to provide training opportunities for community services staff and volunteers.

One of the Cooperative's current projects is the **SKY (Safe Kids & Youth) Coordinated Response** initiative which aims to ensure that children and youth who come forward with experiences of abuse, violence or neglect receive a coordinated, holistic and seamless experience that minimizes re-traumatization. SKY is a unique rural model designed to achieve the same benefits of a Child & Youth Advocacy Centre, across a geographically disperse and mountainous region. Coordination and collaboration among member agencies and community partners is key to creating the intended result.

Visit www.thekoop.ca

Community Connections Society of Southeast BC (CCS) is a non-profit charitable organization that provides integrated, accessible social services to individuals and families throughout the East Kootenay Region. To respond to community needs CCS delivers quality services both directly and through community partnerships. Originally a women's collective formed to provide safe harbor to women fleeing domestic violence, the agency has grown considerably over the years and has taken in new programs in response to emerging local needs.

CCS manages two hubs of services: **Kootenay Child Development Centre** and **Cranbrook Family Connections**. Both hubs are a combination of programs that are managed by CCS and programs/services that community partners manage but with whom

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CCS shares the space and the same philosophy of collaborative service delivery.

See www.ccscranbrook.ca

cbal The Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy

Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy is the Columbia Basin and Boundary's non-profit literacy organization, working in 77 communities across south-eastern BC. Sixteen Community Literacy Coordinators work collaboratively and with local advisory committees to provide literacy programs and services for people of all ages.

Visit www.cbal.org

Revelstoke Community Social Development

The **City of Revelstoke Community Social Development Committee** is comprised of community social sector professionals, business representatives, community members and City councilors. The committee's primary objective is to facilitate proactive planning and action for positive social change with the support of a paid coordinator. The **Social Development Coordinator** addresses community wide issues by: supporting social sector capacity building; conducting higher level planning – including data collection, trend analysis, community consultation, developing mitigation strategies, and setting priorities for action; and supporting action on community priorities through partnership development, accessing funding, and project and program development and oversight.

See www.revelstokesocialdevelopment.org

Creston Community Networking Group. For the last 15 years this community network has been meeting once per month to exchange information and share ideas. A true interagency network, there are about 40 members including the full range of groups from across the community - non-profits, local government, emergency services, churches, the college, senior services, RCMP, media, and many others. The meetings are efficient, lasting only one hour, with each participant providing a 1 to 2-minute update on current activities. Everyone has an opportunity to share, and this relationship and network building has resulted in collaboration on various local initiatives.

West Kootenay Boundary Regional Administrators' Group (WKBRAG) is a coalition of executive directors of 23 social service agencies across the West Kootenay Boundary who meet quarterly to share information and ideas, collaborate on activities, and learn from one another. **PRISM** (Partners in a Regional Integrated Service Model) is an innovative project that emerged from these regular meetings where 13 of the WKBRAG agencies have partnered to develop a model for implementing fully integrated, region-wide service streams for the delivery of specific types of government-funded services. This model would involve multiple agencies delivering a defined service (for e.g. Family Support Services) in an integrated, collaborative, and seamless way through one contract with a host agency in the region. Services would reflect and honour individual community needs and be locally delivered, yet service delivery would be based on a common model of practice, job descriptions, service standards, supervision, training, and case management processes. Data would be gathered regionally and would inform local and region-wide reporting and would target quality improvement efforts. The contracting process with government would involve collaboration with respective Ministries regarding service deliverables that are based on regional demographics, needs, and actual data. Developed in 2015, the PRISM model has yet to be implemented as funds are required to help partner organizations develop appropriate internal structures to support this approach.

For more information on PRISM or WKBRAG, contact Jim Fisher (jimfisher.kfp@telus.net) or Rona Park (rpark@nelsoncommunityservices.ca).

OTHER CANADIAN SOCIAL INNOVATION ORGANIZATIONS

- BC Rural Network (http://www.bcruralnetwork.ca/)

- BC Partners for Social Impact and Hubcap – BC's Social Innovation Hub (http://www.hubcapbc.ca/)

- BC Social Innovation Council and BC Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation (http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/organizational-structure/ministries-organizations/ministries/social-development-and-social-innovation)

- Centre for Social Innovation and Impact Investing at UBC Sauder (http://www.sauder.ubc.ca/Faculty/Research_Centres/Centre_for_Social_Innovation_and_Impact_Investing)

- Centre for Social Innovation (http://socialinnovation.ca/innovation/models)

- Fraser Basin Council (http://www.fraserbasin.bc.ca/)

- Innoweave – Practical Solutions for Social Innovation (http://innoweave.ca/)

- Mowat NFP (http://mowatcentre.ca/research/mowat-nfp/)

- MaRS Centre for Impact Investing (http://impactinvesting.marsdd.com/)

- Ontario Non-Profit Network (http://theonn.ca/)

- RADIUS SFU – Social Innovation Lab and Venture Incubator (http://www.radiussfu.com/)

- RECODE (http://www.re-code.ca/)

- Sparc BC (http://www.sparc.bc.ca/)

- Social Enterprise Canada and enp British Columbia (http://www.socialenterprisecanada.ca/)

- Social Innovation Generation (http://www.sigeneration.ca/)

- Tides Canada (http://tidescanada.org/)

- TechSoup Canada (http://www.techsoupcanada.ca/)

- The Winnipeg Boldness Project (http://www.winnipegboldness.ca/)

- Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement (http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/)

- Vibrant Communities Canada (http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca/)

- Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (WISIR) (https://uwaterloo.ca/waterloo-institute-for-social-innovation-and-resilience/)

REFERENCES & RESOURCES

1. http://www.cbrdi.ca/research-areas/applied-research/non-profit-social-sector/

2. http://www.cbrdi.ca/digitalbasin/wpPrtDriver.php?Community=Select%2520a%2520Community&Theme=Wellness&Pillar=Social&Category=Social%20Svc%20Organizations&AdjustExtent=1

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