

Identifying and removing barriers to the implementation of socioeconomic plans in central Newfoundland



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Introduction

Over the past decade, several local socio-economic planning processes have been initiated within the Gander–New-Wes-Valley area, Newfoundland and Labrador. Community representatives indicate that these processes have been worthwhile, but have also faced challenges and had varying degrees of implementation and success. This poster presents the results of a research project to better understand the socio-economic planning processes undertaken by communities and clusters of communities or ‘regions’ in the greater Gander–New-Wes-Valley region and their implementation challenges. These plans have primarily been community led, but with significant involvement of outside support agencies.

This project was initiated in response to community and regional representatives from Gander–New-Wes-Valley who were concerned by the recognizable gap between the status of their plans and the desired outcomes expressed within them.

There were three key objectives in this community-based research process:

- 1) To identify critical success factors and barriers for small communities in moving from planning to plan implementation;
- 2) To recommend steps that can be taken by local and senior government actors to maximize benefits and minimize challenges associated with these processes; and
- 3) To share lessons on effective community and multi-community socio-economic planning processes regionally and provincially.

The implementation gap

Many authors have identified a divergence between plans and outcomes, which has been referred to as the implementation gap (e.g. Cloke & Hanrahan, 1984; Talen, 1996; Laurian *et al.*, 2004; Markey *et al.*, 2008; Brommelstroet & Schrijen, 2010) (Figure 1). There are multiple reasons for this gap, including: a lack of methodologies for systematic analysis of plan implementation (Laurian *et al.*, 2004); lack of communication between planners/policy makers and community residents, which is often more pronounced in rural planning (Cloke & Hanrahan, 1984; Markey *et al.*, 2010); and planning and development practices that are not sufficiently grounded in place-based specificities (Markey *et al.*, 2008).

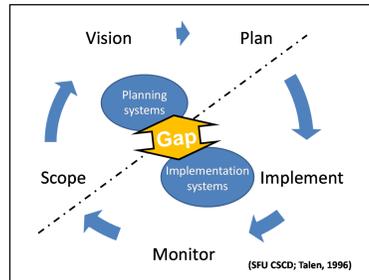


Figure 1: The Implementation Gap

Talen (1996) states that the divide between planning and implementation systems gives a false impression to planning practitioners, policy makers and researchers alike because these two systems only truly function as a cyclic whole. Separating these systems is highly problematic because planning becomes of little pragmatic value if initiatives are not undertaken and objectives not actively pursued.

Methods

This project is based on research conducted by Memorial University students in the 2009 fall semester of the Community and Regional Planning and Development course in the Department of Geography. Phase I (fall 2009) involved interviews and focus group discussions with community and government representatives engaged in seven planning processes. The class project represented the first of a three phased, collaborative, community-based research project initiated by the Gander–New-Wes-Valley Rural Secretariat Regional Council. Phase II of the project involved comparison of the planning approaches used in each of the seven cases, and a workshop feedback session in April 2010. During phase III the regional results were compared to data collected from a survey of regional planners across the province as well as comparisons to findings from other cases in planning and rural development literature.

Planning Context

Newfoundland and Labrador

Since 1996 economic planning in Newfoundland and Labrador has largely been carried out by regional economic development boards (REDBs), which operate on a regional scale. REDBs have developed strategic economic plans, which are intended to develop more prosperous regional economies across the province. The Rural Secretariat is an agency within the provincial government that has taken a more holistic approach to planning, incorporating economic, social, cultural and environmental considerations of development. They are engaged in regional and sub-regional planning, through visioning processes, collaborative partnerships, citizen engagement strategies, and community-based research. Economic and socio-economic planning on the more localized (community) level has been far more sporadic than at the larger REDB and Rural Secretariat scale. In a 2008 self-assessment conducted by 250 municipalities across the province only 36 municipalities (14%) indicated that they had an economic development plan in place and only eight communities had a comprehensive community sustainability plan.

Gander–New-Wes-Valley

In Gander–New-Wes-Valley (Map 1), local planning processes have been initiated mainly by the communities themselves - whether single municipalities, local industry associations or groups of neighbouring communities. Seven local planning processes in the region were identified by the project steering committee for inclusion in the research project: Fogo Island–Change Islands Socio-Economic Strategic Plan 2008, Gander Bay Labour Market Partnership Report 2008, New-Wes-Valley Labour Market Study 2007/08, Town of Lewisporte Strategic Development and Action Plan 2007, Town of Tilting Economic Development Plan 2006, Twillingate Islands Tourism Association (TITA) Master Plan 2003 and Twillingate-New World Island Strategic Plan 2008. Two of these planning documents are labour market studies, three are socio-economic plans and two have a specific economic/sector focus (tourism and port development). Only one, the Fogo Island-Change Islands socio-economic plan, has an environmental focus built into the plan.



Barriers and challenges to implementation

A list of barriers and challenges to implementation were derived from the comparative analysis of seven case studies conducted in Gander–New-Wes-Valley region. They are presented below in descending order of importance according to responses from the provincial survey. The percentage of provincial respondents who felt that each factor presents a major challenge to plan implementation in the province are denoted in parentheses. Some of the challenges encountered include:

- Lack of financial resources (65%)
- Poor communication between communities and groups involved in planning (59%)
- Lack of clear and mutually agreed upon initiative prioritization (53%)
- Lack of technical expertise and leadership skills (53%)
- Lack of human resources and volunteer burnout (47%)
- Lack of interest, involvement or support for the planning process from community members (47%)
- Lack of diversity in leadership throughout the planning process (47%)

Here, it is also essential to note the challenges posed by externally generated changes such as those related to the global economy, youth retention issues and aging populations, which all contribute to a declining labour force and volunteer base in rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

Good practices in planning

Planning processes are reported to have improved relations among those involved and engaged more people in trying to bring about positive changes in each community or region. Particularly where community participation was strong from the early stages of the planning process, this facilitated relationship building, increased communication and problem solving. The following good planning practices were identified from the comparative analysis of case study planning processes in Gander–New-Wes-Valley region. They are ranked according to the responses from the provincial survey and those practices that were considered very important in ensuring plan implementation by the percentage of provincial respondents denoted in parentheses. The most important identified good planning practices include:

- Planning tasks are delegated to specific individuals in a way that recognizes and maximizes use of people's skill sets (71%)
- A shared vision and/or goals are developed with involvement of a relatively broad range of local interests (65%)
- Goals, objectives and initiatives are prioritized with broad-based community involvement (65%)
- Community strengths are inventoried and incorporated into the plan (65%)
- There is a division of tasks and assigned responsibilities for implementation (59%)
- There are secured funds to support the planning process (53%)

Key recommendations

The following key recommendations were derived from the planning representatives in Gander–New-Wes-Valley and then ranked by the response from the provincial survey. The percentage of provincial respondents who felt that these recommendations were very important for their regions are denoted in parentheses.

For communities

- Include prioritization of initiatives and implementation planning in consultant/practitioners' job description or terms of reference (94%)
- Be focussed and persistent, while also adaptable to an ever-changing environment; remain flexible and open to modifying elements of plan if and when external and/or internal circumstances change (82%)
- Support determined and committed stakeholders and volunteers (77%)
- Generate broad-based public interest by creating an inclusive planning environment (77%)
- Monitor, evaluate, and report on planning and implementation, throughout the entire process (77%)
- Create a division of tasks and responsibilities such as through a committee structure (71%)

For government

- To maximize return on investments, provincial and federal governments should encourage and support effective and inclusive planning processes that are likely to lead to implementation (88%)
- Ensure that there is financial support for plan implementation (82%)
- Facilitate improved communication between communities and senior levels of government (77%)
- Assign an agency responsibility for support of local level planning (59%)
- Increase funding support for leadership training (59%)

For planning practitioners

- Assess and build on the unique assets and strengths of each community/region (94%)
- Incorporate action/implementation strategies within socio-economic plans (77%)
- Incorporate local knowledge into planning strategies (65%)
- Conduct human resource/community asset assessments prior to and/or in conjunction with plan development to better understand and work with communities' skill and knowledge bases (65%)

Contributions to research and practice

Much of the literature related to the planning-implementation gap is centred in urban contexts, and provides technocratic solutions ill-suited for the challenges outlined in this study. The lack of rural focus in planning literature has been addressed by authors such as Markey *et al.* (2008) and Markey *et al.* (2010). Within the rural planning and development literature, however, we found similar circumstances to those in Newfoundland and Labrador occurring in rural areas throughout Canada and the United Kingdom. A number of authors have emphasized the importance of place-based development for more effective rural planning (e.g. Cloke & Hanrahan, 1984; Markey *et al.*, 2008; Markey *et al.*, 2010). In Newfoundland and Labrador pressing and widespread demographic and human resources require concerted attention in rural planning processes. Linking research with practice, we are currently engaged in a dialogue with organizations in the Gander–New-Wes-Valley region and the province related to the project findings. We are also undertaking explorations in social and human capital, asset mapping and capacity building in rural development to provide assistance in addressing the recommendations presented above (e.g. O'Leary, 2006; Beckley *et al.*, 2008).

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Focus group discussion in Gander (K. Vodden, 2009)