

Enhancing Lagging Region's Capacity

Cape Breton Region: Social Research and Demonstration Corporation's Community Employment Innovation Project

In 2008, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) conducted a long-term study of the Community Employment Innovation Project (CEIP) that lasted from 1999-2008. The CEIP was administered in six communities in the Cape Breton region of Nova Scotia by Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) and Nova Scotia Department of Community Services. The included communities were Dominion, Glace Bay, North Sydney, New Waterford, Sydney Mines, and Whitney Pier. The combined population of the six communities is approximately 40,000, but divided amongst multiple communities the populations can be considered rural. These communities were targeted as participants in the project because they were believed to have been lagging in terms of employment levels, household income, and quality of life in comparison to other Canadian regions (SRDC, 2008).

The purpose of CEIP was to establish industries, jobs, and improve social capital in areas believed to have fallen behind in Canadian development. The project was intended to be finite as it was expected to provide communities the tools needed to support their own development. The Cape Breton region was identified as an area that had economic decline even when Canada as a whole prospered. The introduction of this project in 1999 hoped to instill a wide array of jobs that would possibly result in increased permanent employment, decreased reliance on income assistance and employment insurance, and improve the work experience of the social capital.

To achieve the goals of the project, collaboration was initiated with municipalities that would ultimately control and coordinate much of the development. The communities would elect a body to oversee progress, set forth priorities, and mobilize assets. The participants were given \$30,000 to cover the costs of planning and technical assistance on the condition the project be operational in 24 months. By placing the responsibility in the hands of the communities the project allowed municipalities and business owners to identify their needs as well as generate employment. The project, in collaboration with funding agencies, municipalities, and businesses, employed multiple unemployed individuals that filled the gaps. This differed from traditional employment programs as it required community and business planning, increased collaboration, and new governance structures.

Between 1999-2008 five of the communities and 250 organizations, developed a total of 295 projects, 2113 placements, and 1300 positions. The two largest job categories were 'Health, Environment, Beautification'; and 'Recreation, Arts, Culture'. Many of the positions created by the project were sustained and provided permanent employment for participating individuals. Other participants became active in volunteer work once the project ended. Other participants that



Image Source: Google Maps

discontinued involvement in the project once it was completed were provided with enhanced job skills and work experience that they gained from their participation.

One of the negative aspects of the project was the low wages offered to participating individuals. Some of the participants who relied on Employment Insurance and Income Assistance returned to those programs at the conclusion of CEIP as a means of income instead of seeking employment. Since the wages were only slightly higher than the welfare provisions, many did not see the incentive to continue to work or seek new employment with their acquired skills. Furthermore, some sector specific positions were not sustained in the long term causing people to seek assistance or new jobs. This is a reflection of the impact individual personalities and economic trends have on a program such as CEIP.

The SRDC (2008) concluded that the CEIP generated more employment and work experience, increased collaboration and planning, and a new cost-effective method for administering employment programs. This indicated that CEIP was more beneficial than traditional, government led, transfer programs because it generated greater community awareness. On this basis, the CEIP was regarded as a huge success.

The project is particularly innovative because it is a new method that addresses a long standing problem. Not only was CEIP novel in Cape Breton and Nova Scotia, it is considered innovative in Canada. By identifying an issue (in this case declining development and social capital) development agencies worked with municipalities and academics to conceptualize a solution. By keeping the unsuccessful nature of tradition transfer programs in mind, the organizers learned from previous mistakes and implemented new ideas.

The end result of the project was a success; this can be attributed to the innovation that led to the formulation and implementation of CEIP. This case study illustrates the effectiveness of collaboration and reflection. Furthermore, had the organizers not involved experts such as academics, the project would lack critical depth. This case demonstrates that new approaches to old problems are most effective when the correct actors are engaged, and a willingness to improve and learn is present. The Cape Breton regional project provided an experimental precedent that demonstrates the effectiveness of the program that may be further applied to other regions (SRDC, 2008).

References

SRDC. (2008). Encouraging work and supporting communities. Final results of the Community Employment Innovation Project.

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