

Sparking Social Transformation through Cycles of Community-Based Research

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ABSTRACT

For over five years, Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (SEE), a community partnership in Northern Ontario, has been developing a supportive ecosystem for social enterprise, entrepreneurship, and innovation. This article sheds light on how the SEE partnership has established a broad spectrum of supports and a healthy ecosystem for alternative economies in a northern, rural, and Indigenous region, from an initial focus on youth, with asset mapping and pop-up events, to its current emphasis on regional networking and train-the-trainer programs for economic development officers. This article argues that the partnership's strong emphasis on community engagement and empowerment, and the cyclical nature of the community-based research methodology has enhanced the sustainability of the ecosystem and leads to systemic social innovation and transformation.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis plus de cinq ans, Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (SEE), un partenariat communautaire dans le Nord de l'Ontario, développe un écosystème favorable à l'entreprise sociale, à l'entrepreneuriat et à l'innovation. Cet article met en lumière la façon dont le partenariat SEE a établi un large éventail de soutiens et un écosystème sain pour les économies alternatives dans une région nordique, rurale et autochtone, d'une focalisation initiale sur les jeunes, avec une cartographie des actifs et des événements pop-up, à son accent actuel sur le réseautage régional et les programmes de formation des formateurs pour les agents de développement économique. Cet article fait valoir que l'accent mis par le partenariat sur l'engagement et l'autonomisation de la communauté, et la nature cyclique de la méthodologie de recherche communautaire a amélioré la durabilité de l'écosystème et conduit à une innovation et une transformation sociales systémiques.

Keywords / Mots clés Social entrepreneurial ecosystems; Community-based research cycles; Social innovation / Écosystèmes entrepreneuriaux sociaux; Cycles de recherche communautaires; Innovation sociale

BACKGROUND

Northern Ontario, a region historically dominated by resource extractive industry and divided by colonialist policies into three “solitudes” of Indigenous peoples, Francophone settler communities, and Anglophone settler communities, has been particularly challenged in recent decades to establish more sustainable economies and resilient communities. As declining industries such as forestry and mining have substantially reduced workforces and/or left the region, many communities struggle to develop new and more inclusive economies as they also face youth outmigration and an ageing population. As increased awareness of climate change gains momentum, the region also struggles with environmental degradation, often disproportionately affecting Indigenous populations, such as the well-documented mercury poisoning at Grassy Narrows or the more recently identified contamination in Attawapiskat. Communities, business and economic development officers, and policymakers have been challenged to find common ground on which to develop a regional economic development strategy.

Social entrepreneurs are sometimes viewed as potential problem-solvers of critical global economic, social, and environmental issues, and ecosystems to support them have demonstrated value in revitalizing declining regions. Theoretical and empirical research into social entrepreneurship ecosystems is sparse, however. This article sheds light on how one such system was developed in a northern, rural, and Indigenous region; it explores how community-based research—with its iterative cycles of planning, action, and reflection—may contribute to the development and sustainability of such an ecosystem.

Over the past six years, NORDIK Institute has provided leadership to a collaborative of numerous organizations across the region to develop a supportive ecosystem for social enterprise development, social entrepreneurs, and social innovators. The Social Enterprise/Entrepreneurship Evolution (SEE) project has recently (March 31, 2019) completed two major funding cycles: the first three years, funded by Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF), focused on developing an ecosystem for social enterprise development for youth; the second funding cycle, a two-year cycle funded by the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Growth (MEDG), focused on social enterprise development (available to all ages) and training for MEDG-funded staff to better support the development of social enterprises.

NORDIK staff used community-based research (CBR) to support the development of a regional ecosystem for social enterprise development and growth. CBR, with its cyclical approach to resolving practical community issues, seemed an ideal methodology to build stronger relationships between and among culturally and geographically isolated communities, as well as foster the development of alternative economies. The numerous collaborators and their networks—including NORDIK’s previous relationships with communities and funders within the region, its cross-sectoral experience, and its strengths-based approach to development—served as a foundation for the development of a sustainable social entrepreneurial ecosystem. This article explores the following question: How can CBR methods contribute to social entrepreneurship ecosystem development, particularly in a northern, rural, and Indigenous region?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social entrepreneurship ecosystems are increasingly viewed as drivers of revitalization in regions experiencing economic decline, and some view social entrepreneurs as being key to solving critical societal issues (Roundy, 2017). Research into social entrepreneurship and ecosystem development has not yet provided substantial insight into these phenomena, however, and has been characterized as an “emerging field” (Howaldt, Kaletka, & Schroder, 2016, p. 2). There is still substantial work to be done in developing a robust theoretical framework supported by empirical data (Roundy, 2017), and this article is intended to address, in part, this gap in earlier research.

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Ben Spigel and Richard Harrison's review (2017) of the more robust literature on commercial entrepreneurial ecosystems reveals resilient ecosystems share a number of characteristics: a) they show high levels of connectivity between ecosystem actors, b) they create new resources that flow through networks, and c) they attract significant new resources to the ecosystem. Additionally, this literature provides some guidance for successful ecosystem development: a) dense social networking mobilizes and integrates knowledge, including knowledge about entrepreneurial processes, which is often facilitated by university research centres; b) they are best led by entrepreneurs rather than top-down leadership; and c) the benefits of the ecosystem usually accrue to entrepreneurs in unrelated sectors (Spigel & Harrison, 2017). Spigel and Harrison (2017) conclude that although entrepreneurial ecosystems can provide substantial benefit to entrepreneurs and start-ups, such benefits may not be distributed equally; they caution that the equitable distribution of such benefits must be addressed.

Research demonstrates that the challenges facing social entrepreneurs differ somewhat from those of commercial entrepreneurs (adapted from Thomaz & Catalao-Lopes, 2019). These include a) difficulty in attracting financing, often relying on public funding; b) lack of business model design that addresses the unique needs of social enterprises; c) lack of planning; and d) lack of human resources adaptive to a complex environment.

By its nature, social entrepreneurial activity (often referred to in earlier literature as community economic development or CED) addresses the inequities resulting from economic activity motivated primarily by profit (Silver & Loxley, 2008). Local people generate social enterprise development based on local needs and resources (Silver & Loxley, 2008). Jurgen Howaldt, Christoph Kaletka, and Antonius Schroder (2016) suggest that social entrepreneurs need to become more aware of their role and successfully negotiate collaborative, cross-sectoral relationships so that social enterprises may play a much larger role in "global prosperity" (p. 14).

The use of CED methods can empower people to address their own social and economic requirements and unleash "enormous creativity" (Silver & Loxley, 2008, p. 12), which may lead to gap-filling or even social transformation. Michele-Lea Moore and Frances Westley (2011) suggest that the difference between gap-filling, or adaptation, and social transformation is simply incremental levels of social change; this theory is supported by empirical research (Seferiadis, Cummings, Maas, Bunders, & Zweekhorst, 2017) that suggests longer-term development efforts "comprising small incremental, locally embedded changes and which recognizes the role of social capital" (p. 57) are key lessons for practitioners.

Moore and Westley (2011) argue that community capacity to create a system of continuous innovation leads to social and ecological resilience. Social networks, led by "institutional entrepreneurs" (p. 5) with a set of defined characteristics are deemed key to the development of such continuous innovation. Such characteristics include the capacity to recognize patterns that act as barriers to innovation; the ability to build and broker relationships through strategic visioning; the ability to reframe knowledge and discourse to engage others; and the ability to inspire, motivate, and empower network members.

Social enterprise research illustrates that dialogue is a key component in the creation of transformative social change through its capacity to build trusting relationships between a broad range of actors (Trivedi & Misra, 2018). The knowledge is deepened and enhanced through iterative cycles of dialogue that empowers participants and builds their collaborative community capacity. This collective wisdom fuels and further refines the iterative cycles of conception, planning, and action.

The cyclical nature of community-based research has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Etmanski, Hall, & Dawson, 2014; Greenwood & Levin, 2006). In their study of women's poverty alleviation in Bangladesh, Anastasia Seferiadis, Sarah Cummings, Jeroen Maas, Joske Bunders, and Marjolein Zweekhorst (2017) conclude that CBR's iterative process was key to shaping the project's characteristics, its impact, and identifying lessons for development practice.

In sum, the literature review suggests that social entrepreneurial ecosystems may serve as a successful economic development strategy, particularly in regions experiencing economic crises, and as a strategy for addressing social disparities arising from dominant economies. Further, such ecosystems may also serve as catalysts and contributors to resolving pernicious social problems.

Key contributing factors for the development of social entrepreneurial ecosystems include

- The engagement of a diversity of actors in iterative cycles of conceptualizing, planning, and action;
- Creating spaces for ongoing dialogue that deepens relationships and builds social capital;
- The mobilization and transfer of knowledge, led by skilled knowledge brokers supported by research centres; and
- The empowerment of network members by focusing on building local economies designed with and by community members, often through incremental changes.

To date, however, there is a lack of both empirical and theoretical research related to social entrepreneurial ecosystems.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT METHODS

Community-based research is a collaboration between community groups and researchers for the purpose of creating new knowledge or understanding about a practical community issue in order to bring about change. The community generates the issue and community members participate in all aspects of the research process. Community-based research therefore is “*collaborative, participatory, empowering, systematic, and transformative*” (Hills & Mullett, 2000, p. ii, emphasis added).

CBR was an obvious methodological choice for the project given the resonance of the above definition with the key factors required for the establishment of a social entrepreneurship network, as identified by the literature review, and with the SEE partners’ overall goal of establishing such an ecosystem. Further, the iterative process of CBR—conception, planning, and action (Trivedi & Misra, 2015)—was expected to create the space for the ongoing adaptation of the methodology to respond to diverse community needs.

NORDIK Institute, affiliated with Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie, provided leadership to the collaborative, hosting the staff and guiding research and development activities. NORDIK’s experience with CBR, its extensive research in the social economy field,¹ its interconnectedness with the undergraduate Community Economic and Social Development (CESD) program—which already integrated social entrepreneurship and social enterprise development into its curricula—and its extensive research and development networks in the region—including robust relationships with Indigenous and Francophone communities as well as other communities and organizations—provided a stable hub and foundation for development.

The development project was founded on collaborating partners’ relationships across the region including funders, community-based organizations, social entrepreneurs, and researchers. The research and development process comprised two major cycles: the first iteration focused on developing an ecosystem to support youth social entrepreneurs (YSEs), and a second cycle emphasized broader social enterprise development and capacity-building among business and economic development officers that was aimed at promoting the sustainability of the ecosystem (ONE-SEP). Together, these cycles aimed at a) addressing the regional gap in social enterprise/entrepreneurship development, and b) ensuring the sustainability and resilience of an ecosystem that could address some of the social, economic, and environmental issues challenging the region.

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Research data was generated throughout the project by monthly teleconference calls between the collaborators, evaluations conducted by research staff at all community engagement events, and at annual and/or regional events. Observations, discussions, and participant feedback on the numerous activities associated with the development were integrated into further planning and action. Additional reflection was facilitated by staff and collaborators at the conclusion of each of the funding cycles and outlined in final reports to the respective funders.

The remainder of this section outlines the more significant processes and activities of the development of the ecosystem.

Cycle 1: Social Enterprise Evolution (SEE)

The research partners worked closely together over an intense six-week period spanning December 2012–January 2013 to develop a governance structure and funding proposal loosely based on a constellation model of collaboration (see Surman, 2006). The partners also adopted a collective impact model for evaluation (Kania & Kramer, 2011),² identifying NORDIK Institute as the “backbone organization.” Funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation in May 2013, these structures were intended to provide guidance to the emerging community-university research collaborative as it aimed to develop an ecosystem to support youth social entrepreneurs (YSEs). The Figure below outlines the structure and key foci of the project activities.

Figure 1: Structure of community-university research collaborative and key foci



The first major research cycle spanned the period from September 2013–September 2016, when funding for the YSE component concluded, although ongoing efforts by NORDIK extended the work to March 31, 2017.

Researchers, using a focus-group process, conducted asset-mapping and learning activities in both geographic communities as well as communities of interest. Individuals, groups, and organizations interested in social enterprise/entre-

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preneurship development were brought together in “safe spaces” where they were provided with “social enterprise 101,” an introduction to the concept, and then asked to identify “assets” related to the development of social enterprises. Through the ensuing dialogue, where facilitators encouraged participants to share their own experience and knowledge, participants usually identified several potential areas for social enterprise development in their communities. Researchers conveyed a written summary of these conversations back to the groups for action.

The most significant research activities from this cycle are outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Cycle 1: Focus on youth social entrepreneurship

Ecosystem Development Area	Activities
Community-University Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• identified Theory of Change• developed constellations• monthly e-meetings & 3 annual symposia provided opportunities for dialogue and reflection, leading to planning and action• community collaborators hosted/assisted asset-mapping & training activities, identified YSEs for “spotlight series,” identified gaps and opportunities to advance project
Human Capital Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• educational & training activities at high schools, community organizations, and events• indigenous-specific project (Urban Indigenous Youth for Change) initiated and funded• university-level course developed & delivered• social entrepreneurship integrated into youth entrepreneurship training summer camps (CFDCs)• advice & support provided to numerous social enterprises and social entrepreneurs on individual basis (telephone, electronic, face-to-face)
Social Capital Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• asset-mapping activities in 8 communities• 3 regional events (Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Timmins) built relationships with policymakers, funders, and between YSEs and collaborators• regional events and asset mapping connected YSEs with supporting organizations and funders, and developed definitions and identified resources• participation in Ontario-wide network (Soscent 7) built relationships with other organizations sharing a common vision
Communications and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• website development (bilingual and culturally appropriate) provided communications infrastructure including access to resources• “spotlight series” in monthly newsletter furthered understanding of social entrepreneurship, social enterprises, and social innovation, and provided role models and mentoring• SEIOI developed and posted to website, delivered to numerous community groups across the region

Figure 2 (continued)

Ecosystem Development Area	Activities
Access to Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • partnership supported one of collaborators to obtain a micro-financing program, Social Enterprise Northern Ontario (SENO), to support SEs (up to \$15,000) across region • allocation of SEE funds to 9 community-based SE start-ups • links to numerous funding sources identified and added to website and advice provided by NORDIK interns as well as workshops for YSEs on funding applications

Cycle 2: Increasing sustainability through ONE-SEP

Funding from a new source, Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Growth (MEDG), was obtained for another two years of CBR, commencing in April 2017. This second cycle of research, based on the identified need for greater ecosystem stability and sustainability, aimed at further developing the skills of business and economic development officers to support social enterprise development across the region; it engaged a second set of partners drawn from regional innovation centres, small business enterprise centres, and campus entrepreneurship accelerators. These new partners, comprising the Ontario Network of Entrepreneurs (ONE), expanded the mandate of SEE, refocusing the collaborative’s efforts toward ensuring that supports were available to social entrepreneurs and innovators through existing government- and/or community-based services.

The most significant activities of this research cycle are outlined in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Cycle 2: ONE-SEP

Category	Activities
Community-University Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monthly e-meetings designed for the planning and coordination of activities, integrate a learning circle component to build capacity with partners • together, partners established a regionally specific definition of social enterprise • over 40 partners including MEDG-funded services, as well as Ministry of Northern Development and Mines regional officers
Human Capital Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • over 115 educational & training capacity-building activities at introductory and advanced levels • Innovation Centres introduced categories of annual awards for “social entrepreneurs” and “social enterprises” of the year • over 470 business and economic development staff were trained to provide support to social enterprise development and social entrepreneurs
Social Capital Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • asset-mapping activities across the region, and included a train-the-trainer event for asset mapping • 3 regional events (Sault Ste. Marie, Kenora, Timmins) built relationships with policymakers, funders, and between SEs and collaborators • peer mentoring/coaching in an emerging field through the various activities – continuum of what peer mentoring means in Northern Ontario

Figure 3 (continued):

Category	Activities
Communications and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• website enhancement and expansion to reflect expanded mandate of collaborative• 32 new training resources – webinars, presentations, workbooks, toolkits – tailored to needs of business service providers including topics such as business development, access to capital, scaling up, and social impact measurement
Access to Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SETUP (Social Enterprise Training that Unites Peers) providing access to capital through CFDC• Social Enterprise Procurement and Investment Readiness Fund (PIRF)• SENO

DISCUSSION

There is substantial congruence between the factors found in earlier research to contribute to the development of social entrepreneurial ecosystems (i.e., knowledge mobilization, spaces for ongoing dialogue, diversity, and the empowerment of actors) and the goals of CBR (collaboration, participation, empowerment, systematic, and transformation). As noted, CBR processes provided numerous opportunities for reflection, including at the conclusion of the two major cycles but also at collaborators' monthly meetings, several regional events, and the conclusion of each community-based activity. The remainder of this section examines some of the key challenges confronted by the collaborative, and sheds light on how CBR methodology, particularly the iterative processes of planning, action, and reflection, supported resolutions to these challenges and fostered the development of a social entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The engagement of a diversity of actors in cycles of planning, action, and reflection

Development efforts in Northern Ontario face substantial challenges in addressing its geographical and cultural diversity. The region's geography—with smaller cities, large rural areas, and numerous remote communities—combined with the cultural and linguistic diversity of Indigenous and settler communities, create unique social, economic, and environmental ecosystems. The engagement of actors reflective of this diversity in the ecosystem development processes was thus essential to its success.

From its inception, the collaborative included economic and business developers, nonprofit organizations, social entrepreneurs, and educators, as well as strong representation from the northeastern part of the region. Early reflections by collaborative members revealed, however, that focused efforts would be required to engage greater representation from the northwest region, Indigenous communities, and Francophone organizations in governance and decision-making. As a result, the steering committee was expanded beyond initial project partners to include representation from the Francophone community, an Indigenous business development organization, and a small business enterprise centre in Northwestern Ontario.

During the first year of activity, staff initiated a partnership with another OTF-funded initiative with the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), representing 49 First Nations across Northwestern Ontario, resulting in the co-hosting of a two-day conference in Thunder Bay at the end of June. Participants at the conference took part in the planning and development of a mission statement for the ecosystem, as well as providing input on the website and communications strategy. They emphasized the need for Indigenous-specific role models and social enterprise examples and communications.

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Reflections by staff and collaborators following this event identified that although the project was attracting a great deal of interest and participation from youth across the region, greater cultural awareness and sensitivity was required to reach Indigenous youth and communities. As a result, an Indigenous-focused youth was hired who was able to identify, before the end of Year 2, additional funding sources to better engage with this cultural group, and Urban Indigenous Youth for Change (UIYFC) was born. This project within a project sparked many new activities, including asset mapping with youth in several First Nations; the development of numerous culturally appropriate activities and materials; and strongly linking arts, social enterprises, and Indigenous youth. The UIYFC project still continues, tackling tough issues such as environmental degradation (e.g., four Indigenous youth made public presentations at a bi-annual meeting of the International Joint Commission on Great Lakes Water Quality) and racism (UIYFC established a province-wide network of Indigenous youth leaders against racism).

Another key example of how the engagement of diverse actors addressed in iterative cycles of reflection influenced and supported the project's development was in increasing the ecosystem's sustainability. As funding of the first cycle drew to a close, the collaborators realized that individually, none of the partners had the capacity to fully support the training and communications infrastructure required for such a diverse and geographically disparate region, although there was strong belief in the value of such an agenda. The partners recognized that enhancing the services already provided to other types of entrepreneurs would best fill the sustainability gap, and providing such service providers with the training and resources to ensure their skills and confidence in service provision met the need. The project's focus shifted in Cycle 2, therefore, to supporting knowledge growth among business and economic development professionals. This was achieved by developing and delivering train-the-trainer workshops and resources, and by promoting such development through participants' various networks.

Creating spaces for ongoing dialogue

Previous research identified the need for ongoing dialogue that deepened relationships between the diverse partners and stakeholders, thereby developing greater trust (social capital) and leading to an increased facility to problem-solve through changing perspectives and using more diverse approaches. The SEE project's space for such dialogue led to strengthened support for individual social entrepreneurs, increased social capital, and the fostered integration of social enterprise development into more "mainstream" economic and business development.

Ongoing dialogue with YSEs during the first cycle of the project identified the need to have access to individualized support to assist them, particularly during the social enterprise start-up phase. YSEs found the processes of developing a business plan that incorporated social goals and measurement with financial viability to be very challenging, and they also found completing funding applications to be a frustrating task. SEE's budget and work plan was therefore revised to reflect the incorporation of two youth interns, renewed throughout the term of the project, who were trained to provide such support to YSEs. The interns provided a series of both face-to-face and online events to support YSEs in the development of start-ups and problem-solving, employing collaborators and social enterprise practitioners as "experts" to provide the YSEs with role models and, in some cases, mentors.

The CBR research activities, such as localized asset mapping, workshops, and seminars, brought together (both face-to-face and electronically) a diversity of people, sectors, communities, and organizations in ongoing dialogue that contributed to social capital development. Social entrepreneurs were able to speak directly with funders, business and economic developers, nonprofits, educators, and others in order to explore challenges, opportunities, and successes. This dialogue strengthened relationships that provided opportunities for SEs to access more traditional grants and loans addressing the significant lack of access to capital.

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The project created the space to strengthen a number of “weak links” with funding organizations, in particular, the relationships of various regional organizations with the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Further, government program and policy staff contributed to developing funding for the second phase of the project, which was obtained through the Ministry of Economic Development and Growth. The success of the project’s first cycle attracted new federal partners to the second cycle, as well as greater interest from business and economic development officers and service providers.

The project’s space for ongoing dialogue also assisted in integrating social enterprise and social entrepreneurship into more mainstream economic and business development. One of the “early adopter” collaborators, a representative from a Community Futures Canada (CFC) program, seized the opportunity the project provided to integrate social enterprises and social entrepreneurship into its mandate for youth entrepreneurship and enterprise development. Through reflections at the conclusion of Year 1, she sought support from SEE to assist her in including social enterprise/entrepreneurship into her CFC network’s annual training events for youth. Again, the work plan was revised to incorporate these activities. Literally hundreds more youth (approximately 150 on an annual basis) were reached through this initiative.

Knowledge mobilization and transfer

At the project’s commencement in 2013, one of its most daunting challenges became immediately apparent: terms such as social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, and social innovation were relatively unknown in Northern Ontario³, and differing types of social enterprises (e.g., nonprofits, co-ops, First Nation-operated organizations, etc.) did not recognize themselves as related, thus eliminating networking that might have been highly beneficial. Further, feedback from project collaborators’ initial meetings, as well as participants in early asset-mapping activities, identified this lack of awareness as a vital factor requiring swift remediation. Staff was thus obliged to focus efforts on addressing these priority needs.

As project collaborators expended valuable time and resources on refining their own knowledge, providing feedback to staff in developing and/or adapting essential resources and materials relevant to the region, and hosting or co-hosting activities, the governance of the project became more and more diffuse. The emergence of various knowledge mobilization initiatives received greater attention and resources. Collaborators were encouraged/supported to take leadership of various activities resulting, for example, in an asset-mapping activity with Indigenous youth which took the form of a one-day canoeing exercise, and the integration of social enterprise/entrepreneurship training into youth camps that had previously excluded the “social” component of youth entrepreneurship.

The involvement of the university’s undergraduate program, Community Economic and Social Development (CESD), as a partner in the collaborative also provided crucial resources and benefits. The continual integration of academic-based knowledge into all communications, together with local knowledge generated by participant feedback, were then woven back into the development of resources. A specific course on social enterprise development was created and offered in the CESD program, and lessons learned were generalized and informed other university courses and curricula.

Given the vast geographic region of Northern Ontario, and the dearth of regional-specific materials and resources for SE development, significant project resources were allocated to the creation, development, and maintenance of an engaging web presence. The CBR participatory methodology enabled SEE to provide the necessary content for the website, with crucial feedback provided by collaborators, partners, funders, and participants in project activities, thereby ensuring that relevant content was created, adapted, and revised. Early feedback from collaborators and participants, for example, on their alienation from the social enterprise terminology and greater comfort with the term “change-makers,” led to the adoption of “see the change” in the website address.

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One of the most vital components of ecosystem development was the website and monthly e-newsletter containing the Spotlight Series, which highlighted social enterprises from diverse cultural groups at all stages of development, with a wide variety of social missions and priorities. These spotlights engaged collaborators and other community members in identifying social enterprises in their communities, highlighting regional and cultural differences and providing role models for YSEs and, in the second cycle, business and economic developers. The SEs ranged from well-established organizations to start-ups, co-operatives to sole proprietorships, employers with multiple staff to volunteer organizations, and much more.

The second cycle of research provided an opportunity to strengthen and expand the training and development resources, with an emphasis on train-the-trainer materials for business and economic development officers. Feedback from participants in training sessions addressed specific needs, such as a resource manual for funding SEs, a facilitator's guide for SE asset mapping, and resources for scale-ups and social return on investment.

Reflections by the first cycle's project collaborators identified a learning community for collaborators as a priority, with such training becoming a regular agenda item at virtual meetings in the second cycle. These training sessions included areas such as scale-ups, social return on investment, and funding opportunities, as the skills and knowledge of the collaborators grew and advanced. The collaborators also provided feedback on topics for webinar development that were delivered during the second major cycle.

The empowerment of network members by focusing on building local economies

Previous research on social enterprise ecosystem development and CBR both emphasize the need for community empowerment. Certainly, in a region as geographically and culturally disparate as Northern Ontario, it was clear that the development of such an ecosystem could only be achieved through the engagement and empowerment of many diverse actors across the entire region. Asset mapping—a key tool in community economic development—served as a foundational tool for empowering local networks to develop plans to address local economic development through their unique historical and cultural lenses. Evidence of participant empowerment was demonstrated by the emergence of an increasing number of actors taking leadership roles in mentoring, financing, and supporting ecosystem development.

Asset-mapping activities (see Figure 2) built social capital within communities across the region, as local groups came together at the behest of collaborators and learned about one another's aims, priorities, skills, and resources. Together, the groups explored opportunities for social enterprise development, and community reports generated by project staff and volunteers assisted them in analyzing their readiness to begin. The strengths-based approach supported confidence building and created a welcoming environment for individuals and smaller, sometimes fledgling, organizations. Asset mapping also created opportunities for people interested in SE to find an initiative to support. Several communities were able to initiate start-ups as a result of these sessions, while others generated planning input for decision-makers.

Access to capital was identified as a crucial component for extending social enterprise development across the region. Early in the project, one of the partners, PARO, was able to lead the development of a new combined grant/loan program called Social Enterprise Northern Ontario (SENO). At the conclusion of the first round of funding, a review of applicants revealed that the eastern region of Northern Ontario was not well represented. The cyclical nature of CBR allowed for the integration of this knowledge into the following year's work plan, with the result that promotion and support in accessing the program in that underserved area was provided within the first funding cycle of SEE and throughout the second cycle.

Feedback from both collaborators and participants encouraged the reallocation of some of the project's funds in Year 3 of the first cycle to direct social enterprise support. This small investment (approximately \$10,000) provided support to

nine community-based SE start-ups, again extending the reach of the project into some new communities, and in some cases, building on asset-mapping activities to strengthen and deepen the project's roots. One CFC partner collaborated with NORDIK and a small business enterprise centre to deliver SE business-plan training to a cohort of nine SEs with the CFC providing access to funding once their business plans were completed. One of these SEs was able to secure over \$500,000 to start up a chocolate factory employing new immigrants to Canada.

As more traditional business development agencies developed relationships with SEs, saw their benefits to the regional economy, and grew confident in their skills to both identify and support SEs, their willingness and capacity to work more closely with this non-traditional sector of the economy grew. This became more and more apparent as business and economic development officers have taken on larger roles in supporting SE development, including, for example, hosting interns, hosting regional meetings focused on SE development, hosting annual awards and recognition for social entrepreneurs and SEs, and collaborating on the development of peer funding circles.

Conclusion

As Marcia Hills and Jennifer Mullet (2000) suggest in their definition, the research processes of CBR are crucial to its proposed outcomes (i.e., collaboration, participation, empowerment, and transformation result from engaging, listening, reflecting, planning, and acting in a way that is respectful to community/network members). The literature on social entrepreneurship ecosystem development implies that a similar and/or related set of processes is necessary (i.e., creating spaces for the community engagement of diverse actors, ongoing dialogue, knowledge co-creation, and empowerment through a specific economic focus). In this case study, the well-documented CBR cycle of planning, action, and reflection supports the goals of both; they might even be considered to have been essential components in its relative success.

The five-year CBR longitudinal study, with its iterative cycles, created the space for networking between and among the various stakeholders. Development activities employed tools such as opening and closing "circles" to various activities; eliciting evaluative feedback at workshops, seminars, and other face-to-face or online gatherings; and annual and regional symposia and conferences. These methods sparked and strengthened new and existing relationships throughout the cycles, allowing staff and collaborators to re-engage community members again and again. This deepened levels of trust among and between geographically and culturally distinct communities, communities of interest, and organizations and funders.

Each of the areas identified in Figure 1 (i.e., governance, human and social capital development, communications, and access to capital) benefitted from the integration of solutions to gaps or needs identified by participants' reflections on the previous cycle(s). This ongoing integration of new insight into the project's work plans and activities was crucial. As documented above, it changed the focus and direction of the entire project, as well as the eventual outcomes. Certainly the relative success of the overall project may be attributed to the emergent nature of the collaborative's learning and its willingness to redirect efforts in creating a supportive ecosystem for social enterprise/entrepreneurial development.

This research confirmed earlier findings that some of the key factors in developing social entrepreneurial ecosystems may be processes employed to engage and empower communities in finding solutions to inequitable and/or failing economies. The findings of this research also suggest that using CBR methodology, with its cycles of planning, acting, and reflecting, may be a preferred tool for developing such ecosystems. In this case study, dense social and knowledge networks emerged that mobilized social enterprise development, sparked community capacity building, and attracted new resources to the sector as its profile and success grew. Network participants demonstrated empowerment as they took leadership in identifying gaps and new resources, started and scaled up enterprises, shared their knowledge and experiences, and obtained recognition for their successes.

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Building a social entrepreneurship ecosystem across the region required the participation and collaboration of a broad range of the region's citizens, organizations, communities, and leaders. Their engagement and empowerment have rooted social enterprise as an alternative model of economic relations and provided Northern Ontario with an opportunity to transform its economy to one that promotes greater equity, inclusivity, and respect for the environment. The ecosystem, if its success continues, may lead to greater resilience for the region and may point similar regions to new processes of economic development that will ultimately result in social transformation.

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NOTES

1. Gayle Broad, former director of NORDIK Institute, was the Northern Ontario lead in the Linking, Learning, Leveraging: Social Enterprises, Knowledgeable Economies, and Sustainable Communities, a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded project in collaboration with the Centre for Cooperative Studies at the University of Saskatchewan.
2. It should be noted that when this research was initiated, the topics of constellation governance and collective impact approaches were still in development, and there was a much less extensive literature than is available today.
3. In fact, Katie Elliott, lead for the YSE cycle of the research, indicated at her employment interview that she had conducted a Google search on these terms combined with Northern Ontario and got absolutely no "hits." An indicator of the project's success was that by the conclusion of the first cycle, a similar search yielded over 100 "hits," with all of them related in some way to this research project.

WEBSITE

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