

# Rethinking Governance: Supporting Healthy Development Through Systems-Level Collaboration in Canada's Provincial North

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**Abstract:** Communities across Canada's Provincial North experience significant barriers to providing adequate food and housing. The ability to deliver these essential services is further complicated by rapid economic growth and industrial development. Although significant in terms of facilitating development, critical issues associated with food and housing often fall through the gaps of government policy and decision making. Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HVGB) is a remote service-centre community in Labrador experiencing both rapid resource and economic development and the associated pressures on delivery of essential services such as food and housing. In response to these pressures, systems-level collaborative approaches to food and housing issues were developed in an attempt to reconcile policy gaps and address growing needs. This article investigates the significance of food and housing issues in the growth of Canada's northern communities. Within that context, the gaps in governance of food and housing issues are also examined. The experience of HVGB illustrates the nature of food and housing stress in these communities and how systems-level food and housing collaboratives can lead to innovative and cost-effective solutions to addressing and supporting demand for growth.

## **Introduction**

Along with clean water and sanitation, food and housing can be considered "essential" services due to their centrality to daily living needs. Communities across Canada's Provincial North experience significant barriers to providing adequate food and housing. The ability to deliver these essential services is further complicated by rapid economic growth and industrial development. Due to inflation and infrastructure capacity limitations, rapid economic development places significant demand and pressure on delivery of essential services. Simultaneously, and despite a variety of opportunities for economic development in Canada's Provincial North, growth is limited

by communities' capacity to meet increased demand for food, housing, and other essential services. Although significant in terms of facilitating development, critical issues associated with food and housing often fall through the gaps of government policy and decision making.

Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HVGB) is a remote service-centre community in Labrador experiencing both rapid resource and economic development and the associated pressures on delivery of essential services such as food and housing. In response to these pressures, systems-level collaborative approaches to food and housing issues were developed in an attempt to reconcile policy gaps and address growing needs. This article investigates the significance of food and housing issues in the growth of Canada's northern communities. Within that context, the gaps in governance of food and housing issues are also examined. The experience of HVGB illustrates the nature of food and housing stress in these communities and how systems-level food and housing collaboratives can lead to innovative and cost-effective solutions to addressing and supporting demand for growth.

### **Essential Service Delivery, Policy Gaps, and the Need for Systems-Level Collaborative Governance**

Economic growth as a result of resource development in Canada's northern communities produces a complexity of economic, social, and environmental impacts. While industrial development can lead to economic growth, these benefits are often outweighed by negative socio-economic impacts.<sup>1</sup> Economic and population growth can lead to increased pressure on delivery of goods and services.

Pressure on the delivery of essential goods and services is not an unknown effect of northern industrial development. An exemplary checklist produced by Susskind and O'Hare<sup>2</sup> detail the social impacts of boomtown situations. They identify a variety of boomtown effects that can lead to negative socio-economic impacts for residents of these communities. Their research points to inflation, overburdened public service sectors, and the inability of the private market to keep up with demand for goods and services. In particular, they identify housing as significantly impacted in the context of rapid growth.

#### *Housing in the Context of Northern Industrial Development*

In a report investigating homelessness in the midst of rapid economic growth, Laird<sup>3</sup> points to Iqaluit as an example of the ways in which northern resource development places significant strain on provision of housing and

other essential services. The city was unable to keep up with the influx of workers relocating from southern Canada and from other Arctic and northern regions; a trend seen in other territorial service centres such as Yellowknife and Whitehorse.<sup>4</sup> It is not only the Territorial North that experiences these housing issues, but also boomtowns and service centres of the Provincial North such as Fort McMurray<sup>5</sup> and Labrador City-Wabush.<sup>6</sup>

There are a few primary issues surrounding housing stress amidst rapid economic development in the North. A first issue concerns the ways in which population and economic growth lead to rapid inflation in housing costs, leaving few to no options for those living on middle, low, and fixed incomes. The situation is most dire for low and fixed income recipients, as provision of affordable and rent-geared-to-income social housing units cannot keep pace with demand. High housing costs can also impede economic growth by deterring others from moving to these communities. A second issue concerns the ability of public services and the private market to develop housing at all. Municipalities are limited in their capacity to develop land. This can be due to lack of funding to provide services (waste disposal, sewer) to that land or, more significantly, lack of land that is viable for development. The example of Labrador City-Wabush illustrates this concern in that no land within city limits, and no adjacent crown land, can be developed due to current or planned industrial developments.<sup>7</sup>

Pressure on the delivery of affordable housing due to economic growth is not unique to HVGB. A report produced for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation in 2000<sup>8</sup> outlines many of the housing-related impacts felt by northern communities affected by industrial development. Negative housing impacts described in the report indicate implications for low-income earners and other residents who already experience socio-economic marginalization. Pressure on housing leads to pressure on a variety of other services. Those who require daily living support or have complex needs (e.g., women fleeing violence, persons with cognitive disabilities, seniors) place increased pressure on social service providers. Additionally, as all residents put aside larger portions of their income for housing costs, there is less available for other essential needs, including food.

#### *Access to Food in the Context of Northern Industrial Development and Economic Growth*

A variety of factors limit food security in northern Canadian communities. Economic growth in the context of industrial development places increased pressure on food systems that are already stressed. Residents of northern communities utilize a combination of store-bought foods, foods grown

within or near communities, and “country foods”<sup>9</sup> to meet nutritional needs.<sup>10</sup> Limiting factors on food security are related to all of these food acquisition methods.

In terms of store-bought foods, long-distance transportation to remote areas has a significant impact on availability, quality, and cost. Fuel and other costs associated with food transportation contribute to food costs, which are significantly higher than those found in Canada’s urban centres.<sup>11</sup> Food quality is also of significant concern. A survey of food quality and availability conducted in a northern region in 2001 revealed significant concerns related to the quality of perishable foods found in local stores.<sup>12</sup> In addition, 80% of respondents indicated that there was never or only sometimes enough variety of fresh fruits and vegetables available for purchase.

The ability to produce or acquire food through gardening, farming, and fishing is limited in northern communities. Short to non-existent growing seasons, light levels, permafrost, and poor soil quality impact the capacity to grow food. Producers often face issues accessing land and safe water for irrigation due to a variety of issues related to resource development. Access to agricultural and fishing supplies is also limited, in terms of cost and selection, due to transportation issues.

Access to “country foods”<sup>13</sup> is under increased pressure. Impacts of climate change are affecting plants and wildlife as well as access to traditional hunting, gathering, and fishing grounds.<sup>14</sup> Access to country foods is also affected by socio-economic issues such as: costs of hunting, fishing, and gathering supplies; ability to adapt work and school hours to seasonal harvesting periods; and loss of traditional knowledge about acquiring and preparing country foods.

All of these pre-existing limiting factors on food security can be further complicated by demands for economic growth and development. As with housing quality and cost, it is possible that lack of good quality food choices and high food costs could deter prospective employees from relocating to the community, thus limiting development and economic growth. Conversely, industrial development and economic growth can add stress to already overburdened housing markets and food systems. Despite this, there is little evidence of any systematic approaches to addressing these overarching and critical concerns.

*Addressing the Delivery of Essential Services in the Context of Economic Growth Through Collaborative Systems-Level Governance*

As basic and essential human needs, food and housing (shelter) share significant linkages and are critical to healthy and sustainable development of communities in the North. Although significant in terms of facilitating development, critical issues associated with food and housing are often fragmented, having little cohesive oversight at municipal, regional, and provincial levels.

An examination of food-related governance structures provides some insight into issues associated with fragmented governance. Today when we think of food production and consumption we are assailed by a multitude of industries. We have food production with separate agriculture and fishery sectors; food industry with a multitude of processing and packaging sectors; food sales with marketing, retail, wholesale, and hospitality sectors; and finally waste management sectors that deal with disposal or recycling of food wastes. There are sectors that each deal separately with labour; the various types of agriculture (fruit, vegetables, grains, dairy); food transportation; food safety; food culture (food TV, food magazines, food websites); school food; and diet-related health issues. Understanding the connections among all of these sectors has become an incredibly complex and daunting task.

Added to this incredible breakdown, division, and separation of food activities is the fragmentation of the political and decision-making structures surrounding food issues. This fragmentation is apparent when we look at the incredible number of regulatory institutions made solely and independently responsible for different food-related activities. To name a few, there are departments of agriculture, trade, waste management, labour, communications, tourism, transportation, and health. The same issues are present with regards to housing. Although provincial-level housing corporations can address a number of housing-related issues, there is significant fragmentation between the various sectors dealing with construction, sales, residential tenancies, social services, and other housing-related sectors. All of the various food and housing-related government and industry bodies create their own policy and regulations to govern their own sectors of these critical systems.

Policy vacuums are created as a result of this fragmentation, where the absence of collaborative planning for food and housing leaves gaps, duplication, and inadequacies in decision-making processes. This occurs among decision-making bodies at all political levels: municipal, regional, state (or provincial), federal, and international. For communities in Canada's Provincial North, the situation is worsened by inadequate funding and

capacity at municipal levels to plan for and coordinate food and housing services.

What becomes apparent is that, despite the significance of food and housing to healthy development in Canada's Provincial North, current governance structures are not able to provide coordinated oversight for growth, changing needs, and circumstances. As such, there is a need for development of new forms of governance that can provide flexibility to adapt to the changing needs and circumstances of diverse and rapidly changing northern communities. There is some promising evidence to suggest that collaborative, systems-level approaches can help to address food and housing concerns in the context of northern economic growth. The experiences of Happy Valley-Goose Bay provide an illustration of the nature of food and housing stress in these communities and how systems-level food and housing collaboratives can lead to innovative and cost-effective solutions to addressing these issues.

For the purposes of this research it is critical to note this distinction between "service-level" and "systems-level" coordination. Service-level coordination focuses on cross-sectoral (or inter-professional) collaboration with the explicit aim of coordinating service delivery. By contrast, systems-level coordination (or collaboration) often focuses on planning, or creating the conditions, for service-level coordination to occur. It is also important to point to the lack of consistent terminology in this area. The terms "coalition," "collaboration," and "council" and derivatives thereof are often used interchangeably. For our purposes, the terms "collaboration" or "collaborative" are used to refer to systems-level collaborative organizations.

### **Case Study: Challenges and Solutions to Provision of Housing and Food in the Context of Economic Growth in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador**

#### *Community Context and Background: Community Description*

Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HVGB) is a remote town located in the Lake Melville region of central Labrador. With a population of approximately 7,500, it is the largest community in Labrador and serves as the administrative centre for the region. HVGB is the only community with a direct link to all communities in Labrador by sea, air, or road. As such, it is a hub for those travelling within Labrador and between Labrador and Canada's major urban centres. Figure 1 provides a demonstration of the town's situation within Labrador as a hub for transportation and service delivery.



Figure 1. Map of Newfoundland and Labrador<sup>15</sup>

Due to the town’s strategic role as a service centre for Labrador, people from other communities within Labrador come to the HVGB for varying periods of time to access services. HVGB is a primary location for residents of Labrador to access health and dental care; make court appearances; visit relatives who are located in the HVGB area; commute to job sites; access retail and banking services; and to avail of other provincial, federal, and Aboriginal government services. Inuit and many Inuit-descendent communities along Labrador’s Atlantic Coast, as well as the Innu First Nation communities of Sheshatshiu and Natuashish, rely on HVGB for essential services. It is a primary location for private and public sector regional or headquarter offices including those of the provincial government, Nunatsiavut government, NunatuKavut, and Labrador-Grenfell Health.



### *Industrial Development*

Happy Valley-Goose Bay also serves as an administrative and transportation centre for mining exploration and development, potential and existing hydroelectric projects, and tourism opportunities. Three recent activities in particular are affecting HVGB: the Vale Mine at Voisey's Bay, the announcement to remove the ban on uranium exploration in the Nunatsiavut Land Claims area, and the development of the Lower Churchill (Muskrat Falls) hydroelectric project.

The company website for Vale NL Ltd. states that the construction and operation of the Vale Mine at Voisey's Bay created approximately 450 permanent jobs on site in northern Labrador.<sup>16</sup> There are no permanent residences at the mine site. Most workers commute via HVGB. A representative from the town of HVGB estimated that approximately 100 of the 450 workers live in HVGB or neighbouring towns, and some of these have moved from other regions of Labrador to HVGB for the convenience of the commute.<sup>17</sup> The Vale website also states that the mine is slated for expansion by 2018 and will employ an additional 350 people bringing the total number of employees to 800 at that site.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project has produced jobs and lead to increased economic pressure in HVGB. The province estimated that the Muskrat Falls project would result in 7,500 direct and indirect person years<sup>19</sup> of employment in Labrador.<sup>20</sup> The province also predicted that peak employment will occur during construction.

The lifting of the uranium moratorium in the Nunatsiavut Land Claims area in 2011 generated new exploration activities in that region. Aurora Energy estimated that the development of a uranium mine in the Makkovik area would generate 700 construction jobs over a three-year period and that the mining and milling operations would employ 400 people for approximately seventeen years.<sup>21</sup> In November 2011, Grand River Ironsands Inc. announced a joint venture partnership with Canadian and South African companies to develop a \$400 million iron sands mining operation and pig iron plant in HVGB creating approximately 200 direct jobs.<sup>22</sup>

### **Systems-Level Collaboration for Housing and Homelessness**

#### *Economic Growth and Housing Stress in Happy Valley-Goose Bay*

In response to economic optimism and its impact on the housing market, there was a residential construction boom in HVGB. In the three-year period 2009–2011, the town issued 176 permits for new residential construction.<sup>23</sup> This number translates into more than 176 residential units as the number



of permits includes, but does not specify, duplexes and multi-unit buildings. That development is on the increase and consistent with the 4.3% increase in the number of dwellings as shown in the 2011 census.<sup>24</sup> Not included in the permit count, however, is the proposed Lethbridge extension development, which is an attempt to provide more affordable housing for low-income residents. This development could have as many as 342 apartments based on fifty-seven lots cleared with a maximum of six units per lot.<sup>25</sup> It will more likely have approximately 200 units with a combination of single homes, duplexes, and other multi-unit dwellings.<sup>26</sup> The pressure that economic development would place on the housing market of HVGB was recognized by the Joint Review Panel Report on Environmental Assessment of the proposed Lower Churchill Hydro Electric Generation project.<sup>27</sup>

*The Happy Valley-Goose Bay Community Plan on Housing and Homelessness*

In response to increasing homelessness and growing pressures on the housing market, stakeholders in HVGB developed a collaborative approach to address changing housing issues and needs. In 2006, with the support of the St. John's Community Advisory Board (CAB), the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and Homelessness Network (NLHHN), and the Regional Homelessness Fund of the National Homelessness Initiative (Government of Canada), representatives of various government and community-based organizations formed a working group to draft a community plan. Following the public release of the community plan in 2007, a Community Advisory Board (CAB) was formed to guide its implementation. The HVGB community plan and CAB are often identified by the NLHHN, and HVGB self-identifies, as the first northern non-designated community to develop a community plan and CAB, although this claim remains unsubstantiated in the literature.

The community plan (the Plan)<sup>28</sup> was created based on a series of consultative and collaborative research processes. It relied substantially on guidance from the St. John's CAB and the HVGB working group. The consultants hired to produce the plan indicate several methods used for data collection: public meetings, focus groups, "secondary research," and key informant interviews (representatives of government and non-government organizations). The consultants also utilized a peer interview process where persons experiencing housing problems were recruited and trained to help design interview tools and act as co-interviewers.

The Plan identifies a variety of issues and makes recommendations focused on those problems identified as most urgent by the researchers. Specifically, the Plan recommends two priority actions. The first action is the

development of a “housing first” approach. The Plan’s definition of “housing first” deviates somewhat from widely accepted definitions found in the literature such as that found in Tsemberis et al.<sup>29</sup> The HVGB Plan describes a “housing-first approach” as: the development of accessible, individual housing units for people with multiple and complex needs, integrated with intensive and flexible community supports and service coordination for consumers. In practice, the communities’ understanding of “housing first” is often based primarily on the provision of “wrap-around” services.

The second priority identified in the Plan is to create a housing development/coordination position to support collaborative planning among and within government agencies and non-profit homeless service providers. The report identifies six other priority issues: accessible housing for people with disabilities; second stage housing for women and children escaping domestic violence; affordable housing for single men; regulation of boarding houses; human resources to provide information/support/advocacy to people with serious housing problems; and training for tenants.

#### *Implementation of the Community Plan*

The release of the HVGB Community Plan on Homelessness and Transitional Housing in 2007 led to a variety of actions focused on implementing the primary and secondary recommendations identified in the report. Upon formation of the CAB, it became apparent that there was a need to address the second priority, creation of a coordinator position, before the first priority could be addressed. In 2008, a “Housing Development Worker” position (HDW) was created at the Labrador Friendship Centre to coordinate housing and homelessness activities, support the CAB, and assist with implementation of the Plan.

In creating the HDW position, the CAB also saw an opportunity to address the first priority: adopting a “housing-first” approach through coordinating wrap-around service provision. Initially, the HDW provided services directly to clients, assisting with finding housing and utilizing a wrap-around approach; an approach identified by the community as a primary component of a “housing-first” model. The wrap-around approach is primarily realized through the creation of multi-agency support teams. These support teams are made up of workers from a variety of agencies, which have been identified as relevant to a particular client’s needs and concerns.

In 2011 a “Housing Support Worker” position was created to take over a large component of the direct support that was being provided to clients

by the HDW and to coordinate wrap-around teams. The HSW creates wrap-around teams comprised of agencies relevant to individual clients' needs.

The CAB also addressed several of the six secondary priority issues identified in the Plan. In particular, it was successful in initiating affordable and supportive housing projects. Implementation of other priority areas remains a focus of the CAB and other community partners. There has been an ongoing focus on issues related to the absence of regulation of boarding houses. The CAB was engaged in identifying possibilities to promote regulatory measures and encourage boarding house owners to provide safe and secure housing for their tenants. Training for tenants in life skills such as financial literacy, tenants' rights, and other areas occurs now primarily through work of the HDW with the support of CAB members.

Other initiatives focused on advocacy, education, and raising awareness have also emerged. These include events designed to work with media and other public partners to provide education and garner public support for programs, services, and policy change to address homelessness and housing issues. The CAB supports an annual Raising the Roof "Toque Tuesday" campaign.<sup>30</sup> Along with other homelessness collaboratives across the province, the CAB hosts an annual pancake breakfast. The proceeds are used to support housing and shelter projects in the community.

The CAB was particularly successful in addressing a number of priorities and actions set forth in the Plan within a relatively short timeframe. However, the impacts of industrial development in HVGB, and in other northern communities, expand beyond the housing market. High costs for housing also impact the ability of residents to meet other basic needs. As housing costs rise, inflation also leads increased costs for other goods and services.<sup>31</sup> This places acute pressure on low and middle income residents, as well as the population in general, to establish access to healthy, safe, and affordable food.

### **The Upper Lake Melville Food Security Working Group**

While many food security issues are generalizable across the North, a 2011 report on food security in HVGB details some specific evidence of their effect in the Central Labrador region. The report details high food costs, poor quality of perishable food items, limitations on agricultural production and fishing, and decreased access to country foods as significant limiting factors to food security in the region.<sup>32</sup> These issues are described in more detail below in order to provide an understanding of the context in which economic growth further limits food security in the Provincial North. It also

provides context for the development of a collaborative entity to address these concerns.

#### *Upper Lake Melville Community-Led Food Assessment*

Similar to most other northern and remote communities, HVGB experiences challenges related to food accessibility, adequacy, and affordability. In 2010 the Food Security Network of Newfoundland and Labrador (FSN-NL), a non-profit umbrella organization for food security initiatives in the province, received funding from the provincial government to support an investigation of food issues in the Upper Lake Melville<sup>33</sup> region. A community-led food assessment (CLFA)<sup>34</sup> was conducted during 2010-2011. The year-long process, which commenced in July 2010, was designed to be a community-driven process, whereby community opinions, priorities, and solutions to food security issues informed the resulting projects. In staying consistent with the values of “community led” food assessments, a resident of the Upper Lake Melville region, with experience and knowledge regarding food issues, was hired as project coordinator. The coordinator was supported by the regional health authority, the FSN-NL, and a local steering committee that was formed to advise and oversee the research. The steering committee was comprised of a cross-section of food system representatives, including producers, consumers, and various government and non-profit agencies.

Several different types of information gathering techniques were utilized. These included: an environmental scan, surveys, focus group discussions, media interviews, public information sessions, as well as interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders (health workers, dietitians, food producers, food retailers, health promotion people, school board officials, teachers, college students, parents, clergy, community workers, food bank operators, rural development workers, town council members, fishers and hunters, gardeners, and residents of government housing neighbourhoods).

A report was produced on the outcomes of the CLFA.<sup>35</sup> It provides a general overview of the geography of the region as well as demographic, economic, and select health indicators for each community and for the region as a whole. This section includes some description of food-related health indicators such as nutrition data, obesity rates, and prevalence of diabetes. The report also provides an overview of the food system in the Upper Lake Melville region, including an assets and gaps analysis of the regional food system, a “community action plan,” and a process for evaluating the plan’s implementation.

There are three primary sections of the report, which contribute to an overall description of the regional food system. These sections focus on: “the

cost of healthy eating”; “community food production”; and “community food access and distribution.” The “cost of healthy eating” section of the report identifies food costs as a primary concern. Although costs are lower than those in more remote communities, retail food prices are still higher than those in “southern” and more accessible regions of Canada. High food costs are identified as especially concerning for those living on low incomes, who might have to make choices between paying rent and buying groceries, or for parents who skip meals to ensure that their children will have enough to eat.

In terms of “community food production,” the report indicates that the Upper Lake Melville region experiences a variety of challenges and strengths. Climate, natural soil quality, watershed condition, and availability of land present a variety of barriers. These are further complicated by water and soil quality concerns due to contamination from industrial development and former waste disposal practices of the Goose Bay Canadian Forces Base. Despite the existence of several farms in the area, producers are challenged by environmental conditions as well as government policies, which restrict the ability to develop land. The report also discusses strengths and challenges with regards to fishing and traditional food access. Primary concerns for these activities as identified in the report focus on loss of traditional knowledge. These activities are also limited due to concerns about environmental contaminants as a result of industrial development activities.

In terms of “community food access and distribution,” a few challenges are identified. One of the primary challenges faced by low-income earners is the distance between low-income housing areas and grocery stores. Much of the social housing in HVGB is not within walking distance of grocery stores, meaning that many residents depend on convenience stores for food purchase. Another challenge relates to the range of food items available for purchase at grocery stores and other food outlets. The report indicates that freight costs are a limiting factor in the ability of the two major retailers to provide a diverse range of products.

Initial data gathering techniques were followed by a community-based priority-setting process. A list of community priorities was compiled based on the information obtained through earlier data collection. Community members were then brought together in various settings to discuss these priorities and to decide which ones were considered most important, which ones were achievable, and how to implement action plans to address these priorities. Six priorities were identified:

1. Development of a community farmer's market
2. Incorporating food growing and nutritious food preparation skills into the education system
3. Creation of community gardens (particularly in low-income neighbourhoods)
4. Supporting and teaching wild food harvesting and preserving skills
5. Increasing community capacity for growing, preserving, and cooking
6. Creating a gleaning and good food box program

Following identification of these priorities, the report lays out a "community food action plan" that describes each priority in further detail. An additional priority, "barriers to farming and new farmers," is also added in this section of the report. The action plan identifies "inputs," "activities," "outputs," and expected short and long-term outcomes for each priority. The report concludes with a process to evaluate implementation of the plan according to key indicators and evaluation methods for each of the expected short and long-term outcomes.

#### *Lake Melville Food Security Network*

Following the launch of the report, the cross-sectoral steering committee that had been formed to oversee the CLFA remained in place to become the Lake Melville Food Security Network and work on implementation of the priorities. Funding for the CLFA process also extended for several months after the launch so that the CLFA project coordinator was able to stay in a paid position to drive implementation of the priorities. During the first year, the food security network was able to fully or partially implement most of the CLFA priorities.

The first priority, a community farmers' market, was established during the final stages of the CLFA in June 2011, once it had been identified as a top priority. The market grossed \$28,629 in sales during the nine-week period that it ran, with local food producers generating 42% of the sales and 2,195 participants attending the market over the course of the nine weeks. The market also provided a venue for canning and preserving workshops with community residents, which helped to address the fifth CLFA priority. For the second year of market operation, the food security network received additional funding to expand market hours and include a café. A significant portion of this funding came from Nalcor (the provincial crown corporation responsible for energy), which had been investing in the community in

anticipation of the development of the Muskrat Falls/Lower Churchill hydroelectric project.

The second priority, which focused on food growing and nutritious food preparation in schools, also met with immediate success. A children's community garden was established on centrally-located town property provided by the municipality of Happy Valley-Goose Bay. Approximately 150 children from the elementary and middle schools took part in the community garden project where they received instruction on planting seeds, tending the garden, and harvesting. This was followed by a harvest celebration where the children used the produce from their garden to create a nutritious school lunch. The principals of both schools expressed support and enthusiasm for continuation of the project in future years. Funding was secured to build on the project in the second year through incorporation of a greenhouse facility and additional growing stations in the schools. The food security network was also approached by the principal of the middle school to investigate possibilities for nutritious food preparation programs. This resulted in after-school programming involving a variety of food-related workshops in the school and expansion to the elementary school.

The third priority, creation of community gardens, also met with success. In 2012 the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation provided the food security network with a vacant block of land in a low-income area of Happy Valley-Goose Bay. This opportunity was facilitated by the corporation's representative on the food security network. Funding provided through a wellness grant from the provincial health ministry provided support for involvement of low-income seniors in the garden project. Two community kitchens were established in the same low-income neighbourhood, further supporting the fifth priority. The kitchens attracted several hundred participants in the first year. They were run collaboratively by the CLFA coordinator and a Health Canada nutritionist. Operation of the kitchens was also supported through food donations from local food retailers and provincial funding from the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation.



### **Building Successful Systems-Level Collaboratives: Challenge and Success in Collaborative Governance for Food and Housing in the Upper Lake Melville Region**

The housing and food collaboratives in the Upper Lake Melville region are particularly noteworthy in their success with addressing priorities and actions set forth in their community plans. The priorities and action items identified in the plans were not insignificant tasks yet both groups were able to address most priorities within a year of implementation; a remarkable feat when compared with similar collaboratives that can struggle for years to implement priorities. It is the commonality in processes and factors involved in the success of these collaborative efforts that are particularly noteworthy in providing potential guidance and strategies that might be utilized in other regions for building community food and housing security.

The experiences of these organizations share a few notable similarities. These similarities can be understood as falling within four distinct approaches to organizational structure and operations: cross-sectoral membership with private sector engagement; flexible community plans; working with opportunity; and utilizing quick wins to build political capital. What follows is a brief description of these approaches and their benefits for building successful collaboratives.

The food security network and CAB both took an intentionally cross-sectoral approach, engaging partners from a multitude of sectors and from various levels of government and non-profit organizations. The diversity of membership brought through a cross-sectoral approach allowed members to learn about an issue, challenges, and potential solutions from a diversity of perspectives, stimulating innovation and new solutions.

Formal membership in the organizations was essentially limited to the public sector, however there was conscious engagement with private sector. This approach, engaging with the private sector in ways that maintained public ownership and autonomy of the group, was especially useful in the context of rapid economic growth. Private sector entities, which were embarking on major development projects, were searching for opportunities to invest in public welfare and community health. The CAB and food security network recognized opportunities to use private sector interest to obtain funding, resources, and other forms of support for implementing priorities in community plans.

Community plans were a critical component of the approach for both groups. The activity surrounding creation of the plans raised awareness throughout the community and created an environment of heightened

interest in issues of food and housing. Essentially, the community plan processes were “tilling the ground” for the cultivation of partnerships, the nurturing of community concern for and understanding of the issues, and the investment in solutions. They clearly laid out a variety of community assets, gaps, and priority issues to focus the groups’ activities. Both plans also allowed for flexibility in how and when priorities would be implemented. The significance of flexibility in plans should not be underestimated: creating definite timelines and structure for interpreting and implementing priorities can lead to disillusionment, disengagement, and disbanding of collaboratives when they are unable to meet the exact goals set by a plan.

Flexible plans paved the way for another critically useful approach: working with opportunity. The food security network and CAB both, to varying degrees, molded their activities to adapt to any opportunities as they arose; e.g., opportunities for funding, other resources, and current events as opportunities for public outreach and education. The greatest degree of success in this approach came when group members were able to drop an activity that was proving unproductive at a particular point, and move on to new opportunities and ideas. A final aspect of the approach involved the willingness and capacity of the groups to encourage, utilize, and celebrate the opportunities presented by “champions” for various initiatives and projects. The food security network was especially successful with this approach. The group consistently utilized a combination of champions, existing resources, and external opportunities or interest to decide whether to pursue a particular initiative, or store away the idea in the event of future, improved opportunities for implementation.

A final aspect of success could be attributed to “quick wins.” Although neither organization was deliberately focused on “quick wins,” working with opportunity led to the implementation of some immediately successful projects. Both groups were able to identify projects that could be implemented fairly quickly (due either to relative simplicity or support from an external partner or champion), and which had the potential to draw wide public attention. An additional benefit of quick wins is their capacity to create broader public support for a collaborative. Allowing private sector, political, or other external partners to take credit can quickly build valuable political capital.<sup>36</sup> Public and political recognition and support then allows for a shift from programmatic to higher-level policy-oriented solutions.

### *Challenges*

Despite success in implementation of plans, there were some organizational challenges that affected the groups' abilities to function cohesively and effectively. One group in particular was most significantly affected; this was due largely to a sudden change in staffing and breakdown in communications with the provincial-level authorities that provided oversight to the organization. As a result, the organization experienced challenges, which manifested in four distinct categories as discussed below: clarity and communications, staff and members, autonomy, and conflict of interest.

Communications among members and clarity in vision, organizational structure, and process were repeated concerns. Many felt that there was lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of individual members. There were also differing perspectives on how to structure the collaborative such that some interviewees called for two groups: one to address policy and strategic concerns, and another for implementation of direct service solutions.

Concerns about staff and members related primarily to consistency and inclusion. There were significant concerns about the effects of staff turnover on the organization's membership: when a member left their position with an employer, new hires were often not interested or mandated to continue participating. This was highlighted as a particularly significant concern for remote communities where staff turnover and "burnout," especially in social service professions, is significantly higher than in urban centres. Staff turnover, and consequent changes in collaboration membership, created a "disjointed" feeling within the organization. Many suggested a need to re-engage with organizations that no longer had representatives at the table.

Autonomy was a significant concern for the collaborative, especially in light of the recent staffing changes. A number of interviewees were concerned about the organization's ability to be autonomous in its decision-making process and to have control over how to apply for and use funding. This feeling of being controlled and dominated in decision-making processes is certainly consistent with a general discourse in Labrador on neo-colonial oppression at the hands of the provincial government.<sup>37</sup>

A final challenge related to conflict of interest, transparency, and accountability. With the diversity of organizations represented, there was disagreement about priorities and conflicting interests between agencies. This also resulted in confusion and disagreement as to whether the organization should function at a systems-level or service-level of planning and program implementation. Transparency of communications among members outside of meetings and confidentiality of discussions during meeting times arose

as concerns. These can be significant and devastating issues, which have the ability to fragment organizations and ultimately can lead collaboratives to disintegrate and disband.

The challenges experienced by these organizations point to important implications for collaboratives in the Canadian context and elsewhere. Most significantly, there is a need to examine ways to create a balance between autonomy and support from provincial and federal funding bodies. The challenges also suggest, when appropriate, a need to conduct organizational evaluations. Although community plans investigate issues of policy, infrastructure, and service provision, they do little in terms of identifying the organizational challenges experienced and strategies needed for collaboratives to effectively address these issues. This suggests that when a collaborative experiences significant challenges, there is a need for funders to provide support for independent organizational evaluations to ensure effective and inclusive collaborative efforts.

### **Conclusion: Toward Flexible and Collaborative Governance**

Economic growth as a result of resource development in Canada's northern communities produces a complexity of economic, social, and environmental impacts. While industrial development can lead to economic growth, the associated benefits are often outweighed by negative socio-economic impacts. Growth of communities is often limited by their capacity to meet increased demand for food, housing, and other essential services.

Critical issues associated with food and housing often fall through the gaps of government policy and decision making. This points to some broader implications for communities in the Provincial North that are experiencing food and housing stress. Ultimately, there is a need to re-think governance models to allow for flexibility, collaboration, and innovation. The experiences of Happy Valley-Goose Bay point to some promising evidence that collaborative, systems-level approaches can help to address food and housing concerns in the context of northern economic growth. There is a need to be aware of potential challenges related to autonomy, organizational structure, and process. However, the HVGB experience also points to some approaches to collaboration that might increase capacity to implement solutions. Collaborative efforts should consider the values of cross-sectoral membership, private sector engagement, creating flexible community plans, and utilizing quick wins to build political capital. One of the most productive approaches for collaboratives to consider is working with opportunity. The willingness and capacity of the groups to encourage, utilize, and celebrate

opportunities and successful outcomes is critical to maintaining a healthy organizational culture and environment for collaboration.

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### Notes

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