

**Assessing Collaborative Research:  
A Case Study of the New Rural Economy Project**

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## ***Introduction***

Social life has changed dramatically from the time sociology was born over 150 years ago. At its inception, sociology was hailed as a scientific mode of inquiry of social structures, which incidentally disregarded the individual as the basic unit of society. Today, sociology looks quite different and the shift in approach can be seen in two ways: sociology has expanded beyond its positivist underpinnings, and at times, dissociated itself from them altogether. In turn, this has shifted emphasis from the top-down scientific approach of social research to a more bottom-up humanistic inquiry which begins at the level of the individual.

Collaborative research is one example of how this shift has manifested itself in social sciences. Rather than imposing the methods of social science on the lives of individuals, researchers and governments alike have realized the importance and need for involving local residents in the research process. This shift in approach can be seen through government initiatives such as the Community Futures Program and Community Economic Development strategies. Both act as means through which community-based organizations can self-actualize to identify problems, develop programs and strategies to increase the well-being of the community's social and economic life (Chappell, 2001). Increasingly, government funding agencies such as the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), are encouraging partner-based, collaborative research.

This paper will be looking at one SSHRC funded research projects called the *New Rural Economy* (NRE) project to analyze the benefits of and obstacles to conducting collaborate research. The NRE project, a \$1.4 million, five-year research initiative of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF), is aimed at better understanding the challenges and benefits of rural Canadian living in a time of enormous social and economic change. The project involves 32 rural communities across the country, 22 researchers, 19 universities, 18 government departments, and 33 partners.

Following a brief overview of NRE project and collaborative research in general, the paper will be broken down into two parts to assess the impacts of such a large collaborative research effort. The first will involve perspectives of community representatives who have participated in the research process, attended conferences and communicated with NRE researchers; the second will be the perspectives of project investigators, administrators and researchers. The analysis will be followed by a brief section of recommendations for future collaborative research based on the NRE experience.

## ***The New Rural Economy Project and Collaborative Research***

Rural Canada is changing. This is one of the key phrases found in many documents produced by NRE researchers. Many rural resource and service communities, once the backbone of the Canadian economy, have declined in recent years due to resource depletion, high out-migration, decreased services and increased emphasis on the global economy (Bollman, 1992). In fact, rural

communities with ties to the global economy are shrinking at a higher rate than those not connected to this economy ([http://nre.concordia.ca/what\\_have\\_we\\_learned.htm](http://nre.concordia.ca/what_have_we_learned.htm)). Along with these changes, the demographics of these communities are also shifting. Out-migration coupled with low fertility rates have led to aging rural populations (Statistics Canada, 2002b). These facts paint a bleak picture of what was once a bustling rural Canada, however, it is not all bad. Some communities have remained stable in recent times, and some have even grown and prospered by attracting in-migrants and/or return migrants (Rothwell, Bollman, Tremblay and Marshall, 2002). Rural areas have become attractive areas for commuters to live (Statistics Canada, 2002b). The purpose of the NRE project is to understand under what circumstance communities decline or prosper in a new global, technological age.

Fully understanding the implications of the shift from resource based economies to technological or new economies requires the participation of individuals and groups representing various interests. In other words, collaborative research must involve all stakeholders. The New Rural Economy Project recognizes this need and as such, is described as a “collaborative undertaking bringing together rural people, researchers, policy-analysts, the business community, and government agencies at all levels to identify and address vital rural issues” (New Rural Economy, 2002). In essence, this statement identifies five main stakeholders holding interests in the processes and outcomes of rural research: rural citizens who are directly affected by economic and social change; researchers across all academic disciplines whose collective involvement can provide an overview of rural community life; policy makers who depend on research to guide their decisions; businesses that serve as the driving force behind the Canadian economy and of course, municipal, regional, and national governments who represent the Canadian public. Collaborative relationships built among these groups are necessary if we are to understand how to ensure sustainable rural economies and maintain a desired rural quality of life.

In bringing together a variety of stakeholders, collaborative research initiatives thus encourage the development of reciprocal relationships between researchers and community members (Macaulay et al., 1999; Stoecker, 1999; Vander Stoep *et al.*, 1999). As was previously demonstrated, reciprocal relationships in the NRE project extend beyond the researcher and community to include a much wider network of bureaucracy, government, and business. The development and success of reciprocal relationships within collaborative research, however, hinges on four important factors: the treatment of individuals as active members of the research process rather than passive subjects (Macaulay *et al.*, 1999; Vander Stoep *et al.*, 1999), the recognition that local knowledge is vital in the information gathering process (Greenwood *et al.*, 1993, Macaulay *et al.* 1999; Stoecker, 1999; Vander Stoep *et al.*, 1999), the involvement of local people at all stages of the research (Burrus *et al.*, 1998; Van Vlaenderen, 1993) and the maintenance of open communication among all stakeholders (New Rural Economy, 2002).

Successful collaborative efforts not only further the achievement of collective goals (Reimer, 1997), they also have other valuable outcomes. Collaborative research can increase a community’s self-interest and build trust among community members and the research network (Burrus *et al.*, 1998), as well as a sense of empowerment among community residents (Macaulay

*et al.*, 1999; Stoecker, 1999). Macaulay *et al.* (1999:3) write that “community specific results include increased local knowledge and capacity, self-empowerment, improves health outcomes and community planning.” This implies that as community members learn more and become more involved with the research process, their ability to take action can increase; i.e. they will have the ability and resource to actualize their own power as communities (Vander Stoep *et al.*, 1999).

### ***Conferences, Consultation and Feedback: Site Representatives’ Perspectives***

One of the main ways the NRE project encourages and sustains its collaborative research mandate is through annual CRRF workshops and conferences. Project researchers pride themselves on the workshop program through events that “bring together researchers, policy-makers, and rural people to discuss rural issues in a rural environment”(Website, 2002). The most recent workshop, held October 24-27, 2001 in Meunster, Saskatchewan, included the highest attendance of site representatives to-date: 20 people representing 12 sites and 8 provinces. Site representatives presented current issues in their communities, attended workshop presentations and participated in ongoing discussions with researchers, policy-makers, entrepreneurs and other conference attendees with vested interest in rural Canada. The following is an analysis of 15 questionnaires completed by site representatives at the conference.

As the literature indicates, collaborative approaches to research consider individuals as active members in the research process (Macaulay *et al.* 1999). Site representatives indicated that through the conference, they felt their voices were being validated. When asked about important things gained from the conference, one respondent wrote: “We now realize that there are people, especially referring to the NRE staff, that are definitely working hard to address and correct what’s happening to rural areas across this country.” Similarly, another respondent wrote that s/he had “a level of understanding that our local issues and efforts are supported and understood by someone out there.” One respondent also wrote that it is evident that people from all over Canada are taking the time to sit together and demonstrate that rural life is important. (Keep this sentences together on the same page).

At a time when rural Canada is depopulating and urban areas are growing (Statistics Canada, 2002a, 2002b), rural people are concerned about their future and how it fits into an urbanized world. One respondent felt that the conference represented a “serious” place to demonstrate the reality of rural life as necessary and unique from its urban counterpart. In fact, the conference was a forum for the “rural voice.” The majority of respondents felt that it was also an opportunity to network with other rural Canadians who share similar concerns about rural Canada. For one respondent, “sharing experiences with other site people, researchers and knowledgeable people interested in the same subject” was among one of most important things learned from the conference. Similarly, other respondents felt that sharing experiences and networking with other people was “very enriching.”

One benefit to bringing rural people together under collaborative research is the opportunity to realize that other people share similar concerns about rural Canada. One respondent wrote, “Only

the landscape of each province is different. We all have the same problems: the young people are leaving rural areas and the lack of industries in rural Canada.” Another respondent reported that she gained an understanding that the people in her community “aren’t alone in keeping the rural connection open.” Similarly, another wrote, “I have learned that communities in rural Canada have a wide range of different problems yet somehow are uniquely the same. They exhibit the same fears and concerns for the preservation of rural Canada.”

Rural Canada is diverse. One respondent expressed this realization, writing that the problems members of his community are facing are quite different from those of other communities under study. By nature of geography, economy, industry and demographics, each of the 32 NRE sites experience different benefits and challenges of rural life. However, as statements in the previous paragraph show, there are common threads. By bringing rural people together, common problems can be discussed in terms of possible solutions. The benefits of this can be seen in the response, “It was interesting to see what other small communities have done to help themselves.” Similarly, another respondent wrote that one of the highlights of the conference was seeing “the approaches of other rural communities to their unique situations, their successes and their failures.”

Networking opportunities provided and facilitated by collaborative research like the NRE project creates a learning environment for stakeholders at all levels. As the above comments indicate, this is especially true of the rural people involved with the project. One respondent noted:

It’s fair to say we all expressed our common concern, that being how can we turn our individual economic and social drawbacks around? It is also fair to say that the conference will certainly help us as individuals to benefit from the ideas and situations portrayed by everyone at the conference.

Gaining knowledge, learning about common experiences and building capacity are all outcomes of collaborative research (Macaulay *et al.*, 1999), and all have been identified above by respondents. Equally, if not more important, is the fact that several site representatives expressed a sense of empowerment from being involved with the NRE project. One respondent wrote, “Toute municipalités rural ont les mêmes problèmes, tourisme, érode des jeunes, manque d’emplois. Lorsque l’ont travail ensemble nous pouvons atteindre de grande chose.” The sense of working together to achieve goals is evident in other responses. One respondent wrote that “rural people must work together and present their ideas to government and politicians and never let up on the bureaucrats.” Similarly, another person wrote “Partnerships are the wave of the future. Communities will have to learn to facilitate cooperation if they want to survive and compete in today’s world.” The majority of respondents felt positively about their involvement in the research. It validates their concerns, and provides an opportunity to communicate with other rural residents.

The majority of NRE site representatives who responded to the questionnaire expressed interest in attending future conferences because they want to learn more about how other rural communities handle change and they also want to meet with other site representatives again. For

example, one respondent wrote this about the possibility of attending future conferences: “Hopefully, I will get a chance to meet the people (friends) I made this year and to see how their communities are doing. This way we can help each other.” Another respondent wrote, “[I want] to build a continuing relationship with the New Rural Economy and all the communities and people who participate in the program.”

### *Concerns*

Clearly, the feedback paints a positive picture of NRE collaborative effort and no doubt, site members will benefit greatly from this research approach. However, several important areas of concern also emerged from the questionnaire responses. A minority of respondents expressed the need for less academic jargon within academic sessions and more round table discussions with other site representatives. The following statement illustrates this point quite clearly:

I would have liked to have seen a few more sessions with less statistics. I realize you, the NRE team, rely upon the stats but people outside of the university level rely on laymen conversations. The round table sessions were about the best information sessions anyone could acquire.

Several other respondents also expressed interest in spending more time discussing the issues they and other communities are facing. Stoecker (1999) argues that research needs to be discussed on the level of the non-academic people involved, so that they can build confidence in their own knowledge levels and skills. This is not to say that community residents are unable to understand academic language. However, because academic language is presented on an abstract level with models and diagrams, it is often removed from the daily language of most non-academics involved in the study.

During several academic presentations at the conference, site representatives expressed their inability to adequately grasp what was being said. On a recent return site visit to Hussar, AB, one of the NRE sites, Dr. Anna Woodrow, project manager, conversed with community members about this subject. When NRE researchers visited the community the year before, the presentations were not in a language that the people could understand. During this visit, Woodrow said a different approach was used. “We had overheads and we didn’t even use them. We talked more about what resources they had, what they needed and whether or not they could use the information we collected about them use on grant applications.” Woodrow added that afterwards, community residents thanked NRE researchers for the presentation and the fact that a more informal approach helped decrease the knowledge gap between academics and community residents.

In fact, Woodrow said that one of the biggest struggles in the project is finding a balance between academia and common knowledge. “It’s important that we are training people to communicate with residents on a level they can understand.” She added that through this, people can feel assured that their concerns are validated and they can see how they can benefit from the research.

Another area of concern voiced by respondents was the need for more government representation at the conference. As one respondent wrote: “It would be nice to see more politicians there, at least the ones that represent the rural areas of our country—they are the policy-makers.” Similarly, another respondent wished that more municipal representatives were at the conference to talk about negative and positive aspects of their rural municipalities and how they overcome the obstacles they face. Expressing a slightly different perspective, one respondent wrote that more responsibility should be placed on conference participants to contact government officials:

Je crois qu’à chaque année les participant(e)s qui se réunissent devaient formuler au moins une ou des recommandation(s) au gouvernement en ce qui à trait à l’économie rurale. Espérons qu’il ya un suivi aux conférences? Sinon, à quoi bon?

### *Collaborative Efforts: A Research Perspective*

Clearly, there are enormous community and individual benefits in conducting collaborative research. However, building and maintaining relationships to achieve collaborative goals is not always easy. Despite the positive feedback from these site representatives on the conference and the research approach, there are several very important obstacles in such a large-scale collaborative effort. First, bringing site representatives and site researchers from across the country to one location is expensive. Transportation, accommodation and translation costs ensued by the NRE project as a result of the fall conference totaled over \$35,000. This figure does not include labour costs associated with pre-conference coordination and organization. The second major obstacle involves communication and consultation. Because the NRE project involves 22 researchers and sites spread across the country, any major decisions made have to go an extensive consultation process. This is often time-consuming.

A recent example of this process and its implications lies in the NRE site booklet project. For the second consecutive year, NRE research staff are producing a set of site specific booklets to provide updates on the project’s progress. This year marks the release of results from the 2001 household survey conducted in 20 NRE sites. These booklets are a result of the NRE’s commitment to communicating with site members and a means to share interesting information about each community. To ensure the pertinence and accurate presentation of results in the booklets, NRE researchers have undertaken a major editing and consultation process among its site researchers. Twenty-one site booklets have taken months to prepare, edit and translate. Upon completion, the total cost of this effort will be over \$10,000 including labour and printing.

Another example of the expense and effort required to make the NRE project successful is the household survey project that took place in 20 sites from May to August, 2001. In total, 1995 people were surveyed and the data collection involved the work of 66 people working in eight provinces. The two main aspects of collaboration with the survey project involved the survey development and its administration in the communities. The instrument, developed in the first four months of 2001 involved collaboration and coordination of 13 site researchers. According to

Teitelbaum (2002), a wide range of issues and interests had to be accommodated to develop one survey. At the end, it involved seven major sections and 54 questions. Incidentally, in a methodological evaluation conducted by Teitelbaum (2002), site coordinators expressed discontent over the survey length, as well as an incoherency of the questions. In fact, coordinators reported that the survey did not flow well because it encompassed too many different topics (Teitelbaum, 2002). Commenting on the instrument's development, Woodrow (2002) said that no one was really happy with the final instrument, however it was still an effort that generated a lot of useful information. "The fact that we did it with the budget we had is amazing," she said. She added that she did not think it was possible. "It was incredible what we did." In the end, the surveys collected were only 205 short of the 2200 target and produced only an eight percent margin of error.

Although site residents were not involved in the design of the survey instrument, an activity more prevalent in participatory research (Burrus *et al.*, 1998), they were involved in the local administration process. The hiring of local callers, and in some cases local interviewers, as part of a site-specific research team represented a second area of collaboration implicated in the survey project. Successful response rates were reliant on collaboration with the community, the presence of the local caller and the dissemination of information about the project itself to local people (Teitelbaum, 2002). In fact, one newspaper report highlighted the fact that the NRE was making use of local resources, thus collaborating with the community (Shewchuk, 2001).

Collaborative work with rural residents through the survey, as well as information dissemination through the media have proven to be in the best interest of all stakeholders. Communication between researchers and community members is ongoing. A level of trust has also emerged between researchers and community residents, something which Woodrow says is important to protect and preserve.

### ***Translation:***

Given the national character of the NRE project, translation is an important aspect of the research. At all conferences and meetings with site representatives, simultaneous translation is a necessity given the fact that site residents are both English and French. Equally important is the fact that all documents generated by CRRF and the NRE must be translated. Since communication is necessary in the collaborative process, materials must be available in both languages. While SSHRC does allot funding for translation, there is a need for more translation funding sources within the social sciences (Teitelbaum, 2001). In fact, translation funding is not explicit in grant application procedures. For example, the NRE did not request extra funding for translation because they were unaware of its availability. Woodrow says at the time of grant application, the research team thought that SSHRC did not fund translation. Currently, the NRE allots \$2000 annually for translation costs, however, according to Woodrow (2002), this is not adequate to cover all the translation costs associated with a national project.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper has sought to bring to light issues surrounding collaborative research. It has shown that there are both benefits and challenges to conducting such research. Benefits include the active participation of stakeholders, the presence of consensus building activities, the development and maintenance of research networks, and most importantly, the realization of community members that the issues they face are worth voicing. On the other hand, collaborative work involves a lot of time and energy on the part of all people involved, as well as enormous financial costs. Collaborating research on the national scale, as in the case of the NRE project, is a major undertaking given the large network of partners, researchers and community residents. While consensus building is implicated in this type of research, it may not always be possible, therefore making compromise and conflict resolution a necessity.

Despite the drawbacks that can occur as a result of collaborative efforts, they are of great importance to the communities involved. Social research is not just academically driven, it is also dedicated to studying people and providing theories about the nature of social life. The benefits of the New Rural Economy's collaborative approach to studying rural communities far outweigh any costs or challenges. The following statement, written by a community resident who attended the conference, captures these benefits:

We've been involved with the research people from the start [and we] never thought about how the project might help us. The conference made us aware that their work could help us directly. It will help the community see itself from the outside.

It is through collaborative research that rural people are able to see the issues they face in a different light.

### ***Recommendations***

#### ***Budgeting Money and Time***

- < Ensure that budgets are constructed with an overestimation of costs. Adequate monetary resources are a necessity of large collaborative efforts often making multi-partnered, multi-funded efforts an inevitability.
- < Seek out any and all funding opportunities.
- < Develop a project mandate and evaluate it regularly. Revisiting project goals and objectives on a regular basis will help develop feedback mechanisms and will increase the chances of receiving future funding.
- < Overestimate the amount of time it will take to finish projects within the research. Set realistic deadlines, ensure deadlines are enforced but realize that collaborative work is time-consuming.
- < Make every effort to get stakeholders involved at the onset of the project. This includes community members, research and government officials. Their ongoing support will aid in the project's success, as well as increase their interest in participating.

#### ***Communication***

- < If the project is bilingual or multilingual, seek out any and all translation funding opportunities.
- < Ensure that academic documents can be translated into popular language. This makes information more accessible and increases the potential reading audience.
- < Create a project logo and prepare promotional materials for dissemination This helps legitimize project objectives and its appearance to interested audiences.
- < Create a project web site that is kept up-to-date and maximize the Internet's potential through video conferencing, web cams, chat rooms, etc.
- < Make use of print, radio and television media. Regular contact with journalists increases the chances of information dissemination and potential audiences.

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