



RESEARCH TO PRACTICE NETWORK

## **Community Capacity Building in Child Welfare Services**

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# Community Capacity Building in Child Welfare Services

## Background

Early in its first mandate, the BC Liberal government was active in a number of areas that pertained to child welfare. While in opposition the BC Liberals were critical of the previous NDP administration's management of child welfare services. The new Liberal Minister, Gordon Hogg, signaled his intent to move toward community governance of child welfare services. This plan followed on the Gove Report (1995) that recommended a wide variety of changes to BC's child welfare system. Under the Minister's direction, regional governance groups were established to plan for devolution of child welfare services to communities. Five governance and planning groups were organized in each region and each region also developed an Aboriginal planning and governance group.

This represented a major undertaking that was even more daunting given that the entire process was set within an overall government policy framework of severe restraint. Initially the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) was targeted for a budget reduction of 23%, a figure that was later eased to 11%. Despite dire warnings regarding the consequences, the government proceeded

with its revised 11% target for budget reduction. By 2003 this figure was achieved and perhaps to reduce some of the political fallout or perhaps to reinforce its stated commitment to community innovation and control, the government decided to allocate 10 million dollars to be equally distributed among the five MCFD operating regions. An additional 10 million dollars went to each of the five regional Aboriginal governance groups. The fund, which came in the form of a single grant, was titled Strengthening and Creating Capacity to Care for Children and Youth.

The purposes of each 2 million dollar grant were to:

- reduce the number of children and youth in care within the Ministry while ensuring their safety and well being;
- support projects that build capacity in communities and families to return children and youth who are currently in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development;
- support families in the growth and development of healthy, safe children and youth; and
- support collaborative community projects that will prevent the necessity of high-risk children and youth from coming into care.

Each of the five operating regions was to identify a partner that would be responsible for distributing the funds, managing the program, and evaluating outcomes. In the North Region the Ministry of Children and Family Development approached the School of Social Work at UNBC to distribute the money and manage the grant fund. This was a new experience for the School of Social Work and it involved certain challenges.

Faculty members in the School of Social Work had some misgivings about the fund, given the exacting toll inflicted on social services as a result of government austerity. It was a matter of not wanting to be seen as complicit in the severe cost cutting measures implemented by government. Nonetheless, the fund created opportunity to facilitate innovation and conduct research concerning sustainability and capacity building. In the final analysis the UNBC School of Social Work decided to accept the grant and administer the fund. An important challenge related to the matter of fairness in that the School of Social Work

suddenly became a funder and this has certain implications. The fund was set up in a transparent manner and organizations throughout the North Region of BC were invited to submit proposals by way of the BC Bid process. The School of Social Work received 86 proposals.

An “expert” panel made up of three academics and one practitioner was recruited to assess and recommend successful applicants. All members of the selection panel were unaffiliated with UNBC, though the practitioner had taught several sessional courses in the past. The panel used a scoring formula to select organizations and projects for funding based on the following criteria:

- The proposal builds community or family capacity that will enable the return of children or youth currently in care.
- The proposal supports a collaborative community project that will prevent high-risk children and youth from coming into care.
- The proposal supports families and communities in the growth of healthy safe children and youth.
- The proposal is coherent, congruent, and sound in its presentation.
- The proposal identifies clear and measurable objectives with specific ways of observing or measuring the objectives.
- Competent personnel will be in place to evaluate and measure the desired outcomes and the proposal will include a clear plan for quarterly reporting of information (financial and programmatic).
- The proposal is sustainable through volunteers or existing resources.
- The specific target group is clearly identified.
- The proposal will involve collaboration with other agencies or organizations in the community particularly in the areas of integrated case management and wrap around case management.

Grants were allocated to five sub-regions within the North Region boundary of MCFD. The number of grants allocated to each sub-region depended on factors such as population and health and social service resources. The projects received funding of up to \$75,000.00 for 18 months though the start-up dates for each

project varied due to staff availability and other internal organization factors. This was clearly indicated to be one time funding with no commitment to continue the funding beyond 18 months. The organizations that applied and the organizations that received funding were clearly advised about the limitation associated with the fund. All of the projects concluded in 2005. The projects broadly fell into one of four main activity areas:

- Skill training and enhancement of staff and allied resources
- Development of a new program
- Enhancement or expansion of an existing program
- Community and client education

In addition to UNBC administration fees, a portion of the grant was allocated to research to be undertaken by the UNBC School of Social Work. The research was concerned with outcomes. Initially there was a focus on capacity but capacity is a difficult concept to evaluate and measure, particularly within the context of community and the numerous confounding variables that come into play. As a result, the primary focus was on sustainability with a secondary consideration about capacity. Both terms require some definition.

## Capacity

Considerable discussion concerning capacity building emerged during a period of time when governments of all political stripes were retreating from responsibility for social welfare provision. In Canada, the federal government's role in funding the provision of social welfare services has substantially declined and more responsibility has shifted to the provinces. Increasingly, expectations are placed on community-based voluntary, charitable, and non-profit organizations to address social problems and needs (Chappell, 2001; Gill & Thériault, 2003). In the field of child welfare, the importance of encouraging communities to use local resources to build capacity to solve local problems has garnered political attention (Trocmé & Chamberland, 2003; Wharf, 2002).

Various definitions for capacity development advanced in recent years (Kaplan, 2000; Laverack, 2004; Pauer & Torres, 2011; Pender, Murdaugh, & Parson, 2002;).

Rogers, Howard-Pitney, and Lee (1995) regard capacity building as the transfer and development of knowledge, skills, systems, and resources to communities to effect change. According to Frank and Smith (1999) capacity building is based on the idea that community sustainability can be improved over time. Still others argue that the notion of building capacity is context specific signifying that a community's capacity to address day care issues may be different from its capacity to address child welfare issues for example (Goodman et al., 1998; Parker, Eng, Schulz, & Israel, 1999).

Within the community empowerment literature, a capacity approach to community building is grounded in an assets-based model, which promotes recognition of the power and capabilities that individuals already possess (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). It sees community members as change agents in the context of the constraints posed by existing social structures and power relations. Fitzsimons and Fuller (2002, p. 483) describe the dimensions of capacity development as requiring “increased knowledge, skills and personal growth, a better understanding of one's position in relation to the surrounding social and political forces, and enhanced perceptions of self-efficacy, personal control, self-esteem, and political efficacy.”

## Sustainability

Capacity requires sustainability because the individuals, groups, and organizations develop the abilities and resources to maintain community 'owned' initiatives (Rissel, Finnegan, & Bracht, 1995). Bamberger and Cheema (1990) define sustainability as the capacity of a project to continue to deliver its intended benefits over a long period of time. According to the US Agency for International Development (1988), a sustainable development program is able to deliver an appropriate level of benefit for an extended period of time after major financial, managerial, and technical assistance from an external donor is terminated. Gates and Lee (2005) define sustainability as the capacity to enhance and maintain resources that contribute to individual and community well-being.

Most of the definitions suggest that sustainability represents endurance or lasting effect. The definitions apply to individuals, families, organizations, communities, and systems. Friedman and Schreiber (2007) note that without sustainability, program development is of little consequence. At the end of the day, a fairly clear

measure of sustainability relates to whether a project endures and continues beyond the initial grant.

## Research method

Data collection sources included the initial proposal, quarterly activity reports, an evaluation survey, a personal interview with project managers at the conclusion of the funding period, and personal interviews with project managers six years following the termination of funding. The initial goals and objectives of each project were examined along with the activity reports, final evaluation surveys, and personal interviews with the project managers once project funding ceased and again six years later (in 2011). All data were analyzed to identify and categorize themes germane to the research question, with particular attention focused on sustainability. Case studies are presented based on the four thematic categories regarding sustainability. The characteristics of each category are described.

## Description of the projects

As previously noted, the funds were allocated and divided to insure that the main geographic areas and population clusters of northern BC received a fair share of the fund money. This division identified five areas of the North Region: the Peace River area, the Prince George area, the Quesnel area, the Lakes and Bulkley Valley area, and the Northwest area. The funded projects fell broadly into the domain of child welfare but they represented a range of different northern organizations as displayed in the following table:

*Table 1 - Funded Organizations*

Type of Organization	Peace Region	Prince George Region	Quesnel Region	Bulkley Valley/ Lakes Region	Northwest Region	Total
Aboriginal	2	1	0	1	4	8
Non-Profit	4	7	1	1	2	15
Education	0	0	0	2	0	2
Total	6	8	1	4	6	25



The Aboriginal organizations included First Nations Bands, First Nations Family Service agencies, and Friendship Centres. The non-profit organizations spanned a spectrum from small child development agencies through to local branches of large national or international organizations. The education organizations included a school district program as well as a community college program. Organization budgets ranged from less than \$100,000.00 per year to millions of dollars in the case of a school district.

The funded projects delivered direct service to a range of groups including clients, volunteers, professionals, paraprofessionals, and agencies. The services delivered to volunteers, professionals, and paraprofessionals included education and training activities. In total, 308 professionals, volunteers, and paraprofessionals received service during the course of this project. Some examples included specialized training for volunteers that targeted children with special needs; team development and team building training; and training in delivery of parenting programs. The services to organizations involved provision of materials and orientation to particular programs as well as public awareness regarding child welfare issues. For example, one organization delivered a program to other agencies and organizations designed to prevent child abuse through educating volunteers, coaches, board members, and officials. The services to individuals and families included advocacy, support, skills training, and education and skills training in a variety of areas, especially parenting. Two organizations addressed fathers, which was an important development as parenting programs for fathers are difficult to find in northern BC. One First Nation that experienced negative effects resulting from the federal government residential school policy, obtained and modified a program designed to educate and enhance the skills of Aboriginal parents. This was delivered to 110 parents in the community.

The number of clients that received service ranged from a low of 16 to a high of 2500. The dispersal of funds through five sub-regions resulted in a fairly widespread distribution of projects in northern BC.

## **Sustainability as an outcome**

Sustainability involves changes to agency practice, employee practice, client capacity, and overall community capacity. Scerri and James (2010) argue that while governments look for quantitative measures to determine and evaluate

sustainability, a true measure of sustainability is qualitative as well as quantitative. Sustainability within this context is difficult if not impossible to measure given many intervening and confounding variables. For example, in one project a group of fathers attended meetings designed to enhance their capacity to parent. The content of the program provided the fathers with knowledge about child development, child behaviour, age appropriate activities, communicating with children, and managing child behaviour issues. The group also created a connection among the fathers, which led to mutual support and social contact outside the formal group setting. The enduring sustainability of the knowledge as well as the social connection is difficult to evaluate over the longer term.

Sustainability connected to delivery of a specific program is much easier to assess as this can be observed through evaluating the continuance of a specific program. The receipt of funds from this grant produced four distinct program-sustainability outcomes. First, there were programs, activities, and initiatives that ceased to operate with the exhaustion of the funds. Second, there were programs that declined in overall activity and capacity but continued to survive at a reduced level of delivery. Third, there were programs that continued to operate and even expand in terms of delivery or presence. These programs found ways to maintain the initiative that was facilitated by the one-time injection of funds. Fourth, there was one program that continued to operate as a result of obtaining an additional source of funding. Many of the applications, including successful proposals that received funding, established a goal or objective of finding and securing additional funding that would enable their project to continue. However, this proved difficult to achieve. The results using the four outcomes described above are displayed in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

*Table 2 - Program Sustainability by Region*

Outcome	Peace Region	Prince George Region	Quesnel Region	Bulkley Valley/ Lakes Region	Northwest Region	Total
Termination	4	5	1	1	3	14
Reduced Activity		1		1	1	3
Continuation	2	2		2	1	7
New Funds					1	1

*Table 3 - Program Sustainability by Type of Organization*

Outcome	Aboriginal	Non-Profit	Education
Termination	5	8	1
Reduced Activity		3	
Continuation	2	4	1
New Funds	1		

*Table 4 - Type of Project by Activity Area*

Outcome \ Activity	Training	Program Development	Program Enhancement	Client Education
Termination	2	2	1	9
Reduced Activity		1	2	
Continuation	2	3	2	
New Funds				1

## Case Studies

The case studies are based on information gathered through the termination interviews, the interviews conducted six years after termination (in 2011), and examination of the documentation accumulated through the project's lifespan.

### *1. Termination*

The projects that terminated shared the same basic characteristics. The projects used the funds to hire an employee or employees to deliver and in some cases develop a specific program. In the initial proposal the organizations indicated that they would be able to find additional funds or reallocate resources to continue the program. In almost all instances this did not happen. One project was able to obtain new funds to continue employing a staff person who provided client education and advocacy services. However, this was the single exception.

A second characteristic of projects that terminated was that they used the money to hire contractors such as external trainers, consultants, or educators, to deliver a program to an identified group. One organization hired an external consultant to deliver a training program for parents with special needs. This

particular organization had a number of parents who were hearing impaired and had children in care. The relatively isolated location of the community and the lack of local resources to deliver a parenting program that incorporated signing communication was a severe restriction. The program funds enabled the organization to hire specialists on contract, which resulted in increased parenting capacity and, in one case, return of children who had been in care. However, with the exhaustion of the fund the capacity and ability to deliver this type of service disappeared. It was not sustainable given the dependence on a specialized, external, contracted resource.

## *2. Reduced activity*

A second group or category of projects included organizations that had to reduce activity after they were able to develop a program or enhance an existing program with the project funds. With the termination of the funds these organizations had to cut back and reduce the level of program activity. The fund enabled an organization to deliver a program that supported and taught low-income parents to read to their pre-school age children. The fund paid a staff person to spend time training volunteers to run groups and to directly operate the groups. However, once the fund was terminated the number of groups that the organization was able to operate each budget year was reduced from 11 to 4. The program was sustained but at greatly diminished capacity. Like those projects that terminated, this type of project increased individual, family, and community capacity but the degree to which this will be sustainable or endure over time is difficult to assess.

Another example involved training volunteers to provide support to families at risk of having their children come into care due to concerns regarding neglect. Materials and curriculum were developed and continue to be available for public use. However, the lack of continued funding is a problem, as the organization does not have a staff resource to conduct the training.

## *3. Continuation*

The third category of project and the type that is of greatest interest involves projects that were sustained once the funds were exhausted. The continuity of these projects could be attributed to a number of factors best illustrated by describing three examples of sustained capacity.

In the first example, the organization developed a group art program for foster children with a diagnosis of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. The funds enabled the organization to hire a staff person with the specific task of developing the program. Program development involved recruitment of local artists willing to volunteer their time and skills, training volunteers who were interested in this type of approach, and advertising the program among local social workers and social service agencies. Once the program was developed and established it was incorporated into the regular operations of the agency and required no additional funds to sustain. It quickly became a credible program supported by child welfare social workers. The training capacity and volunteer nature of the organization allowed it to add this as a program variation within the existing structure. The program is likely to be maintained over the longer term without the need for additional funds.

In a second example, a large organization funded a facilitator to provide training in an assessment protocol or model designed to increase safety of children in the community. The training program was promoted among local organizations and their staff were encouraged to participate in the training. Existing agency staff members became qualified trainers and the strong interest and support among the broader community allowed this program to continue in an effective and sustained manner. The trainers have been able to train other staff so that the program continues even when people retire or leave the organization. The program continues to operate effectively even after the funding terminated.

In a third example, a small non-profit society developed a proposal to create an inter-agency group that would address children at risk by developing a structure for improved communication, collaboration, and coordination among community agencies. The project involved hiring a staff person to meet with the various agencies, gather ideas, facilitate community meetings, develop a structure for inter-agency collaboration, and coordinate the inter-agency meetings. The inter-agency group became a viable operation and when funding for the staff position terminated, the inter-agency group continued to operate. In this case, the coordination for continuing the inter-agency meetings was taken on by permanent staff without additional funding. It meant adding to the workload but due to the establishment of viable structure, it did not create an unmanageable burden. The introduction of the temporary staff position enhanced the organization's ability to develop a structural component that permanent staff did not have time to pursue.

The successful projects in terms of continuation did not develop new programs that were completely dependent on paid staff positions. They built on existing infrastructure, or used a temporary staff resource to build new infrastructure, and they made extensive use of volunteers and community members. The continuing projects were collaborative in nature and developed strong support within the community.

#### *4. New funds*

As noted, only one project successfully obtained a new source of funding to continue activity. Many of the projects set the acquisition of new funds as a goal but this was difficult to achieve.

## **Discussion**

The results of this project vary but building and sustaining capacity was associated with a number of characteristics. A total of 14 of the 25 projects terminated following exhaustion of the funds. Seven of the projects continued to operate at more or less the same level of intensity. Another project continued once it found a new source of ongoing funding. Four additional projects survived but at significantly reduced levels of activity. The results suggest that new programs, which depend upon specialized paid staff resources, are not likely to be sustainable once funds terminate. It is important to recognize that these types of programs have a positive impact but it can't be said that the impact is lasting.

With this type of temporary funding, continuity and sustainability often depend upon the ability of an organization to create programs or structures that can be sustained through volunteers. Organizations that developed or had a volunteer system in place were more likely to be successful. Sustainability also occurred if existing staff were able to assume responsibility for the program without excessive burden or additional responsibility.

Finally, community support and collaboration with other agencies is also important in the creation of a sustainable program. In the six-year follow up interviews project managers talked about the importance of gaining and holding the support of other groups within the community as a means to support continuity of a project or program.

Findings suggest that a level of sustainability can be achieved by developing resources that are used by volunteers and existing agency or organization personnel. However, the effects of this “more with less approach” must be questioned. For example, how many volunteers can a small northern community maintain and sustain and when do volunteers reach a point of exhaustion? While volunteerism is generally seen as a good thing, it also represents reliance on a residual system of welfare. The state has role to play in providing funding structures that are continuing and predictable. While one time injection of funds can produce some benefit it is not a substitute for full state engagement.

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