

# Synthesizing the Research Results Where is the Common Ground?

by Bill Ninacs

Are there any common themes that can be discerned in the research reported in the preceding articles? Are there collective learnings that can be gleaned from their results? If you are like one experienced practitioner I know, a first read through made him wonder if the various project conclusions and recommendations could be dovetailed at all.

Fortunately, I have been able to read the reports and other documents which have been produced by the various research teams. Studying them through the lenses I wear as a practitioner, teacher, and student of CED, I've concluded that there are indeed some important points of convergence between the different research projects. This article proposes to highlight some key areas where there appears to be common themes and conclusions.

## Clarifying the Scope of CED

Everyone agrees that CED is a development strategy. In Canada, development strategies, policies, and practices have been devised in four main fields: culture, the economy, health and social welfare, and the environment. As a rule, programs and policies are implemented within a single sector.

(Admittedly, a variety of social policies cut across the board—those having to do with education, civil rights, specific constituencies, and the like. But, in my mind, these tend to primarily target individual development rather than that of a community. As such, they play a supporting role rather than being development spheres unto themselves.)

However, the definition contained in the original NWG research competition asserted that CED works to improve both the economic and social well-being of communities. It follows that CED relates to more than one sector of policy at the same time and the research confirms the intrinsic socio-economic duality of CED. (See table, this page.)

More interesting, however, is the research's indication that CED goes beyond simply having economic and social goals: CED strives to actually harmonize them. As a friend recently mentioned, CED tries to erase the line separating the economic and social development realms.

CED practices are also sensitive to pressures from the cultural and environmental spheres in order to maintain a holistic perspective.

CED practitioners mix and integrate practices, programs, and policies which are found in both the economic and social development domains. Although the researchers never specifically targeted this aspect of CED practice for examination, from my personal point of view I suggest that it is this crucial merging and matching of objectives and tools that leads to tangible social and economic results.

Some of the research reports, especially the WomenFutures/SPARC one, allude to the complex interrelationship

when practices from both fields are integrated. But more analytical research work needs to be done at this level. Nevertheless, the studies do relate a myriad of concrete examples and case studies in which economic and social goals are combined.

***CED's leitmotif of economic empowerment is a direct result of its overall objective of social inclusion. As the research reports testify, marginalized communities tend to make remarkable progress on all levels—not just the economic one—when they control the resources required for their own development.***

The relative importance of social and economic objectives within any particular initiative is in fact somewhat fluid. People and the circumstances in which they live are in a state of constant flux. Internal and external factors influence the weight given each domain, and these may change over time.

The research seems to suggest that the ability of CED initiatives to account for and adapt to these changes may be the factor which makes CED a relevant and effective strategy. This flexibility may be related to the difficulties that can at times be encountered in evaluating CED. But the variable and varying proportion of economic to social goals is also the reason for the broad spectrum of types and forms of CED initiative—their “sheer diversity and inventiveness,” as one report observed.

TABLE: SCOPE OF CED INITIATIVES

FIELDS LEVELS	CULTURE	ECONOMY	HEALTH & SOCIAL WELFARE	ENVIRONMENT
MACRO (NATIONAL)				
MESO (REGIONAL)				
MICRO (LOCAL)				
<b>COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT</b>				

Beyond simply having economic & social goals, CED strives to harmonize them, & erase the line separating the realms of economic & social development.

Another aspect of CED's scope is its primary focus on particular localities. Development policies and programs are implemented on three broad levels: the macro level, which pertains either to the country, to one or more provinces, to an entire industry, or to a specific subset of the broader population (e.g., aboriginal people, women); the regional level, which relates to a specific territorial subdivision; and the micro level, which is either a small geographic entity or a small group of people belonging to a specific community of identity.

Although the "community" in community economic development is not exclusively geographic, the research projects point out that actual initiatives by and large are territorially based, covering relatively small areas. CED initiatives are local ones, as a rule. As one of the reports points out, while some CED efforts may be directed towards macro or regional development strategies, as a rule the goal here is to ensure that these strategies are supportive of local initiatives or that they enhance policy implementation at the local level.

## **Common Themes in CED**

### ***A Strategy to Include the Excluded***

Poverty, the distress following economic shocks, socio-economic oppression related to gender and other differences—these are the overriding issues which emerge from the research projects. But it's in fact the resulting social exclusion, often referred to as "marginalization," which is a primary target of CED initiatives.

Although social exclusion can occur either on a geographic level (in urban neighbourhoods, in small towns, in rural villages) or on a demographic one, the outcome is fundamentally the same in all cases: people are excluded from access to the resources that they need to develop themselves as human beings and to assume their roles as citizens.

As some of the research reports indicate, social exclusion has been aggravated by structural changes in our society. It has little to do with either the personal willingness of the disenfranchised to gain such access, or with the goodwill (or absence thereof) of those who exercise control over the resources. This is why Stewart Perry's definition of CED as an "institution-building process" is so fundamental: new structural relationships must be established if the excluded are to be included.

CED is also premised on a belief that people and communities can change and that access to economic resources can enable many of them to integrate or reintegrate with the mainstream if they want to—as most do. CED's leitmotif of economic empowerment is a direct result of its overall objective of social inclusion. As the research reports testify, marginalized communities tend to make remarkable progress when given the ability to control the resources required for their own development on all levels, not just the economic one.

### ***Community Participation***

The research identifies participation of community members as being a powerful component of the planning, implementation, and evaluation of CED strategies. Indeed the results suggest that participatory approaches to strategic planning, both within a community and within an organization, are a common feature of successful CED projects.

## ***Economic Tools to Secure Social Goals***

The tools and methods used within CED initiatives vary according to the degree of disenfranchisement of the people involved, and according to the quality and quantity of resources which these people may possess or which may be available to them. However, within the CED rubric, economic tools of some kind are always used as part of the strategy to meet social goals. Indeed, most CED initiatives covered by the research focus on building specific economic institutions, organizations, and businesses which aim to increase community control of economic resources and enhance efforts to create and sustain opportunities for marginalized individuals and communities.

### ***Intermediary Organizations are Key to Success***

As the research attests, structures that organize, co-ordinate, support, direct, and invest in CED efforts are a central dimension of successful CED efforts. These "intermediaries" are usually nonprofit, democratically-controlled organizations with an array of functions and activities. The nomenclature of intermediaries—community development corporations, community land trusts, community loan funds, etc.—only hints at the range of their endeavour.

As many of the reports acknowledge, these intermediaries are empowering by their very nature, allowing communities to exert a degree of control over their own economic development. Two reports conclude that local organizations that are comprehensive in orientation and controlled by community residents are the most efficient and effective means to ensure concurrent and continued CED planning and action.

### ***CED is Comprehensive in Orientation***

The exclusion of individuals and communities results in conditions of distress characterized by multiple needs and problems. For example, a combination of childcare, income support, access to credit, and literacy training may be required to realistically enable an individual to enter the labour market or to begin the process of developing a micro-enterprise.

On a broader tier, relevant technical assistance, access to equity and debt investment, competent training resources, and an organization that can put it all together are essential to community revitalization. In short, the research confirms that CED is a multi-faceted intervention, requiring the assembly of a spectrum of resources to address the multiple challenges involved in social and economic development.

### ***The Role of CBOs***

For decades, community-based organizations (CBOs) have been on the front lines of fighting poverty. They are often one of the few resources in distressed communities that still think in terms of community organizing. Indeed, the research indicates that community organizing is an essential prerequisite and on-going characteristic of successful CED efforts. The weaving together of people and organizations so that they work with a sense of common purpose and social cohesiveness is an on-going challenge within CED practice.

In addition to being enlisted as community development resources, CBOs are in themselves often sites for CED-related projects and action, although they are often not recognized as playing this role. This is particularly highlighted by the research on women's participation in CED.

### **Extreme Poverty Requires Special Measures**

The APEC and Québec reports establish a link between diversified economic activity and increased participation of community members and hence, a better chance of successful integration of economic and social goals. They also indicate that conditions of extreme poverty are generally not favourable to CED success.

In such circumstances, measures are required to prepare the groundwork from which CED can emerge as an important strategy. For example, some of the research indicates how important as a first step in the empowerment of "excluded populations" are economic self-help groups aimed at problem-solving, advocacy, and mutual support. Beyond this base level of organizing, programmatic thrusts focused on building the motivation and self-esteem of individuals may be necessary as part of a preparatory strategy for broader CED action.

### **Training and Technical Resources are Critical**

CED initiatives are heavily influenced by the quality of the local leadership. The research indicates that competent training of local leadership is an important factor in creating the basis for more effective integration of social and economic goals and the management of the resultant development strategies. More generally, the availability of training and technical support for the local capacity-building process is confirmed as an important part of any serious CED support system.

Another level of training and education cited in some of the research that bears noting relates to practitioner development. CED management is complex and demanding. It requires a range of knowledge and skills which crosses over diverse areas, for example, community organizing, organizational management, and business development, to name some of the main ones. Skills in complementary fields such as conflict resolution and team building are also needed.

Professional development opportunities remain weak in Canada. The most consistent and effective training is taking place through a handful of training/technical assistance intermediaries scattered across the country. Universities suffer from being poorly connected to practitioners although a number of individual professors have been supportive of CED initiatives. Without a more formal commitment, the necessary capacity required to make a contribution to CED practice will remain limited.

### **Policy Implications**

The underwriting (in whole or in part) of private, nonprofit CED technical assistance initiatives is seen as a way to ensure the availability of such services to groups which cannot otherwise afford them. It is also a means to build technical assistance tools adapted to CED objectives and practices.

Public funds are hence needed to support the various CED "intermediaries" (community development corporations, community loan funds, etc.) that are so fundamental to CED achieve-

ments. Support programs must recognize CED's intrinsic dual nature and must therefore be flexible, non-fragmented, and include assessment procedures based on multiple bottom lines.

Recognizing the CED approach also means programs that acknowledge the long-term nature of the empowerment process. Some of the reports indicate the counter-productiveness of certain short-term projects. They didn't allow enough time to meet social goals when dealing with specific constituencies, or to meet economic goals relating to planning and implementing business ventures.

The long-term nature of CED also requires support programs which span the cycle beginning with the initial mobilization and training of local leadership, and leading to the on-going training, technical assistance, and research and development requirements. Here again, some of the reports find that existing programs rarely underwrite such community efforts or only a small portion of them.

On another level, although the economic side of CED business ventures is by nature self-sustaining, the social side is not. The costs of trying to meet social needs in the process of running a business often require support on both the financial and professional levels. Government programs must provide the required resources if social goals are to be attained. But sometimes the economic component may also require public support. Two of the research reports specifically target access to credit as a critical issue and the lack of adequate equity and debt financing programs in certain areas (especially urban ones) as a major concern.

Policy implications related to CED training revolve around the need for programs supporting both formal and informal learning initiatives. The research reports conclude that both types are required. They also suggest that carefully structured public support to private, nonprofit CED training intermediaries could strengthen the training and technical support available to local groups and communities. These could even possibly be an important resource to those universities that are increasingly interested and committed to CED.

Finally, a number of the reports contain the rather benign recommendation that existing business development policies and programs be made available to alternative, community-based ventures such as co-operatives and nonprofit organizations. A word of caution is however necessary in this regard. Such openness must not relegate a CED initiative's social objectives to the wayside. Technical assistance and evaluation procedures must therefore be able to accommodate CED's socio-economic duality.

### **Conclusion**

The four projects shed a substantial amount of light on what CED actually is. As the reviews of CED literature point out, there continues to be considerable variation in the views on this subject. The projects' conclusions help to clarify this debate and, while they don't necessarily reconcile the different opinions, they at least indicate where many of them intersect. There are nonetheless areas of divergence which have not been dealt with in this article. Their very existence points to the need for further research. ✍

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