Building on the strengths of your community:
A guide in 8 simple steps

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Preface

This resource guide was produced by the Canadian Model Forest Network (CMFN). The CMFN brings together 14 member Model Forests across Canada, each with its own broad multi-stakeholder network of participating organizations and communities. These include: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, industry (forestry and other land uses), government (municipal, provincial, and federal), non-government organizations, schools (elementary to university), and researchers.

Each Model Forest works regionally to promote the sustainable management of large forest landscapes through research, education and applied projects. Model Forests support forest-based communities by bringing together the information, tools and best practices needed to overcome obstacles and identify new opportunities. This guide was developed under the national Socio-Economic Indicators program. It is supported by a steering committee of CMFN members and partners from across the country.

A network of researchers, community practitioners, community members and Model Forest staff from across Canada helped develop this guide. We thank them for their contributions. The guide was piloted by three communities: Manitowadge, Ontario; Michipicoten First Nation, Ontario; and the Rural Municipality of Upper Miramichi, New Brunswick. We would like to thank the people who organized and participated in these pilots.

For more information on the Canadian Model Forest Network, consult www.modelforest.net. To learn about the Forest Communities Program, consult http://cfs.nrcan.gc.ca/pages/233.

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Introduction

Many resource-dependent communities in Canada face similar challenges. Stories of mill closures, job losses and other hardships have dominated the news for years now. Yet there are communities, which, when faced with a major threat or downturn, have worked together to rebuild and reinvent their local economies. In Chapleau, Ontario, for example, local entrepreneurs, with the help of an economic development association, are currently rebuilding and diversifying the forest economy through a strategy of value-added wood product clustering and non-timber forest products. A new cedar mill and a Canada yew processing plant are already in place.

What do these communities have in common? Some people call it "community capacity." What it boils down to is an ability to mobilize the knowledge, skills, and resources that exist within the community. Although the current context is difficult, all communities have the ability to build their capacity. It is a matter of working together to identify the unique qualities and strengths inherent to each community, and then devising ways to capitalize on these assets. Change often occurs in small steps, and it is remarkable what can happen when a group of committed local residents decide to come together in support of their community.

This guide aims to help communities with an important step in the local development process – doing a community assessment. This is an exercise that brings a group together in order to gather information about their community. It helps provide a deeper understanding of what their community looks like and what issues local people are concerned about. This puts the group, and the community as a whole, in a better position to identify priority actions and to make sound decisions concerning the future of their community. A community assessment can be the foundation for community monitoring, local planning, economic development and improved governance. It is a useful exercise both in good times, and during challenging times.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to community assessment. Instead of prescribing a specific approach, this guide provides an 8-step process for conducting a community assessment. The guide also includes a resource section, which features a wide variety of tools, techniques and information sources that are readily available, most often on the Internet. Users of the guide can thereby pick and choose from amongst these options to tailor their community assessment to their own needs. Specific resources for Aboriginal communities are also integrated into the guide.

A community assessment does not have to be a complicated exercise. It can be carried out by a group of local citizens or by a local organization such as a municipal council, First Nation or Model Forest. This resource guide is therefore aimed broadly at rural residents interested in improving the situation in their communities. The focus of this guide is primarily on forestry-dependent communities, but the tools, resources and lessons are broadly applicable to rural and urban communities more generally.

Purpose and Benefits of Community Assessment

The purpose of a community assessment is to develop a better understanding of the conditions within a community. It is often integrated into a community development or community planning initiative as it allows participants to more accurately identify the strengths and weaknesses of the community. Community assessment exercises tend to seek out different kinds of information, including socio-economic data and the perspectives of local residents. As such, it relies on a mixture of approaches for data collection.

The benefits of community assessment are numerous:

- can help uncover unique qualities, hidden strengths and underutilized resources within a community

- allows for a more informed and objective discussion when determining community priorities

- generates credible information that can be used to obtain support for programs and services in the community and help leverage funding from government agencies, corporations or foundations

- creates a collaborative environment, which can strengthen networks and foster new projects and initiatives

- helps educate local residents about their community and about the process of data collection and analysis

- participants can monitor progress towards commonly-held goals and evaluate the impact of programs and services

Case study of a community assessment in Leaf Rapids, MB

Leaf Rapids is a small community located in the boreal forest of Manitoba. The closure of the mine in 2002, the community's main employer, caused a significant drop in population with associated declines in services and infrastructure. The community was therefore keen to work on projects that would help revitalize their economy. They joined forces with the Rural Development Institute (RDI) at Brandon University for a pilot project to test a community assessment framework developed at the university.

The assessment was based on the Community Health Action Model (see section 5) that includes data analysis around ten categories: health, safety and security, economics, education, environment, community infrastructure, recreation/heritage/arts, community processes, social supports, and population. Information collection for each category was based on a combination of statistics and the direct input of residents. The project took advantage of what was a regular tradition of community meetings in Leaf Rapids. This allowed residents to express their views and contribute to identifying goals and strategies. A considerable list of projects was identified through the community meetings, such as a seniors support program, small business seminars, and a Cree cultural awareness program.

As the project moved along, participants became aware of other knowledge gaps and a series of research projects were developed, such as a population count, a photo-voice project with local youth, an assessment of students' needs and aspirations, and a review of access to health care issues in the community. The photo-voice project was particularly successful as it gave local youth a voice, it generated new knowledge and resulted in an exhibit, entitled "Leaf Rapids Through the Eyes of Youth".

For more information see, in the references, the report "Leaf Rapids: Community Assessment" by the Leaf Rapids Advisory Committee.

8 Steps to Consider in Designing a Community Assessment

There are many ways to do a community assessment, and the approach very much depends on the objectives set out by participants. However, we have developed a series of 8 steps that can serve as a guideline for structuring a community assessment.

STEP 1 – Identify a group and set some ground rules

Identifying a group is an essential step in a community assessment. Participants will play a central role in determining objectives, interpreting results and deciding on next steps. In some cases, an existing group might be appropriate while in other cases a new group will need to be formed (or some combination of the two).

In creating a group it is important to be inclusive, and to build diversity (linguistic, cultural, socio-economic, etc.) into the membership. The participation of people with diverse background will add richness to the assessment by broadening the issues and perspectives that are brought to the table. On the other hand, it is important to keep the group to a manageable size. A group of about six to twelve people is recommended.

Keep in mind that there may be people in your community who are faced with barriers to participation, such as difficulties with reading, writing, or other physical or intellectual barriers. Being aware of these challenges, and working to create an environment which facilitates the participation of all people, is key to building inclusivity.

It is helpful to have people on board who are knowledgeable about the community.

They will know how to access information, they can open doors in terms of contacts, and they will provide all-important context to data analysis. It is important to consider whether participants have the skills needed to undertake an assessment, such as data collection and computer skills. Working with local organizations can be helpful in this regard, as they may be able to provide financial support or lend resources such as staff time, office space or a computer.

The group must also decide on some basic ground rules, such as how decisions will be made, how conflicts will be managed and who will facilitate discussions. Some groups choose to hire a professional facilitator, while others ask an individual from the community to volunteer as facilitator. Section 5 provides further resources on collaboration and consensus-building.

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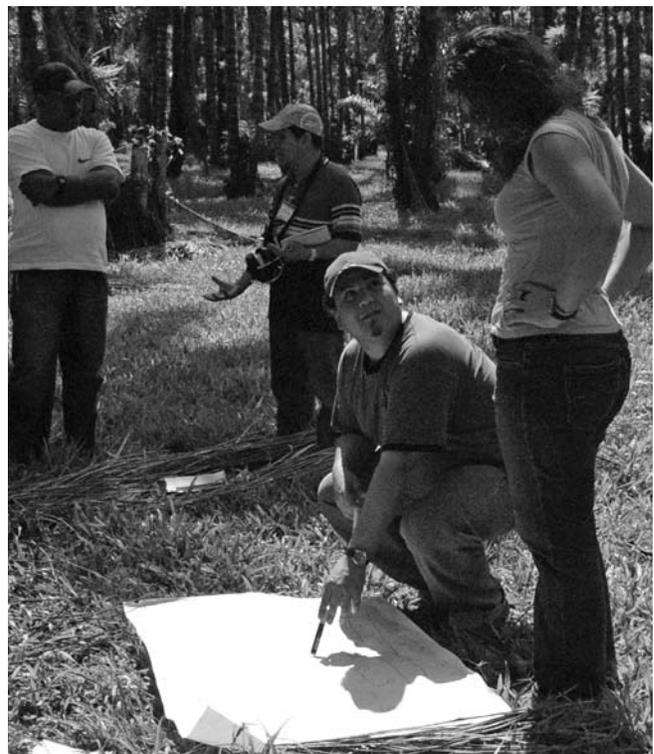
Community assessment participants might include...

- full-time or part-time residents
- indigenous peoples
- business owners
- environmental advocates
- local historians
- elected officials
- municipal administrators or planners
- scientists
- foresters or fish and wildlife officers
- artists
- outdoor recreation users (e.g. hunters, anglers, hikers, bikers, skiers)
- industry representatives
- retirees
- teachers or students
- members of clubs and organizations

STEP 2 – Define the scope of the assessment

It is essential for the group to agree on and clearly articulate the purpose of the assessment before getting started. Failing to do so can be the downfall of a community assessment, as data collection may lack focus and can become an objective unto itself. Defining the scope of the assessment allows participants to identify what questions need to be answered, what information is needed and what data gathering methods are most appropriate. Groups should consider writing down the purpose of the assessment in some type of vision statement. This allows participants to regularly revisit their objectives and ensure that activities are in line with the intended purpose of the exercise.

Some questions to ponder when defining scope

- What is the main question you need answered?
- Who is your audience?
- What is the geographic scope?
- What is the time frame?
- What do you hope to achieve?

STEP 3 – Determine what resources are available

Data collection can be an expensive undertaking. This is especially true if you choose to collect your own data by surveys or interviews. Before designing research methods, it is therefore important to determine what resources (time, money, people, services) are available for the project. Groups should consider doing a rough inventory of the skills of each participant as this will allow them to identify what expertise will be needed from outside the group. Having a realistic idea of what resources are available allows the group to design a cost-appropriate assessment process. Again, other organizations within or outside the community may be able to provide assistance. Universities and colleges, for example, may be able to provide research advice, access to materials, or even a student intern.

Organizations to approach when looking for resources

- Economic development offices
- Service organizations
- Universities and colleges
- Municipal, regional, provincial and federal governments
- Voluntary organizations
- Charities and foundations
- Regional development agencies

STEP 4 – Design your assessment framework and select methods

An assessment framework is a series of questions or themes that structure the data collection process. It can be as simple as the list of questions identified during the scoping exercise. There are also guidebooks to community assessment that suggest framework categories, such as different types of assets (social, economic, built environment, services)[1] or community attributes (people, organizations, resources, processes)[2].

The framework provides the basis for the development of indicators or measures. Many community assessments rely on a series of 'community indicators' to illustrate conditions within their community. Indicators can be used to report on economic conditions (for example employment rates, poverty rates), social conditions (rates of volunteerism, stability of leadership) or environmental conditions (water quality, extent of forest cover).

The health of a community is inextricably connected to the health of the natural environment. In fact, many assessments of environmental health include socio-economic dimensions. There are specific tools designed to help communities learn about the quality of their natural environment.

Many community assessments are based on existing data sources, such as statistical data from the census or a chamber of commerce. Others incorporate primary data, meaning information gathered directly from local residents and organizations. While this approach is more time-consuming and costly, it can provide specific, meaningful, and context-rich information about a community.

1 Falls Brook Centre. Sustainable Communities: A Guide to Community Asset Mapping.
2 Center for Community Enterprise. The Community Resilience Manual.

Holding a focus group with local residents, for example, may tell a group much more about the employment situation in a community than simply looking at employment statistics from Statistics Canada. Combining the two types of data is often a very effective strategy. There may also be existing studies within a community, such as earlier community plans or historical studies that can provide useful insight into past and present issues.

To ensure consistency in data collection, it is important to define the boundaries of the assessment. The term 'community' may mean different things to different people. When choosing the unit of analysis, it is worth considering the scale for which data is available.

Some frameworks to consider

Measuring Community Capacity Building: A Workbook-in-progress for Rural Communities, by the Aspen Institute

- outlines a series of 8 desirable outcomes for communities covering citizen participation, leadership, skills, effective organizations, resource utilization and more
- provides a detailed list of indicators, sub-indicators and measures

The Community Resilience Manual, by the Centre for Community Enterprise

- gives a step-by-step approach to assessing resilience, creating a portrait of resilience, selecting priorities and creating a plan
- includes portrait covers 1) people 2) organizations 3) resources 4) processes with indicators
- provides tools such as sample invitations, surveys and interview questions

Measuring Community Success and Sustainability: An Interactive Workbook by the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development

- helps communities learn how to measure progress towards self-established goals
- is organized around 5 community outcomes:
     1) skills and knowledge 2) relationship and communication 3) initiative and adaptability 4) sustainable ecosystems 5) healthy economies
- provides guides for thinking about indicators, information needs, potential sources and data collection methods

For more information about these frameworks, see the sections on Resources and the References Cited.

Food for thought when selecting methods

Measure more than just the economy – Clearly, it is not only the economic attributes of a community that influence success. It is important to integrate social and ecological dimensions in an assessment as this creates a more complete portrait of sustainability.

Consider combining data collection methods – Quantitative and qualitative data are highly complementary. Combining the two in an assessment allows a portrait of the community to emerge that is both impartial and nuanced.

Rely on pre-existing information – There are often existing studies about a community that can provide useful background information. Avoid duplicating efforts (and save money and time) by exploring pre-existing sources before undertaking new research.

Consider re-visiting issues and measures – The downside of a single community assessment is that it provides a snapshot of the community at a given point in time. Doing repeat assessments allows participants to assess the validity of their findings and chart the direction of trends.

What are community indicators?

Community indicators are the measurement approach of choice for many community assessments. They allow communities to portray and track both socio-economic and ecological conditions.

There are different kinds of indicators. Some are quantitative, meaning they are statistically based. They have the advantage of being comparable across jurisdictions and sometimes over time. They can also be relatively inexpensive to implement, as some statistics are readily available from local, provincial or national sources. Other indicators are qualitative. They are designed to gauge human values or perceptions and are often collected directly from residents. The advantage of qualitative indicators is that they can provide specific, nuanced and contextually relevant information about a community. A drawback, however, is the cost of first hand data collection and analysis, and the lack of comparability with other studies.

Examples of Indicators used in Rural Community Assessment

Social indicators:
Age distribution
Ethnic diversity of the population
Women in municipal leadership
Volunteerism rates
Recreation programs
Access to health care professionals
Long term care facilities

Economic indicators:
Hourly wages
Average income
Incidence of low income families
Housing affordability
Food bank usage
Income equity (gap between rich and poor)
Unemployment rate
Number of business permits issued

Natural environment indicators:
Ecological footprint
Air quality
Bird population surveys
Food grown locally
Pesticide use
Wastewater treatment
Drinking water quality

Education indicators:
Classroom size
Grade 3 achievement scores
Libraries in municipality
Adult literacy rate

Adapted from: Canadian Federation of Municipalities Quality of Life Index, Indicators of Community Sustainability, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

STEP 5 – Collect information and analyse!

The effort associated with data collection depends very much on the methods that are applied. Some, such as a community survey, might require more time and resources than a series of semi-structured interviews. Keep in mind that local residents and organizations are an excellent source of information and that most local residents are eager to talk about their community. There are also excellent information sources available from governments and other organizations. Many of these are on the Internet.

Many community assessments include some form of first-hand data collection, such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, or town hall meetings. Asset mapping is another innovative way to gather community perspectives. These techniques and further resources to learn about them are included in section 5.5.

When data collection and analysis becomes more complex, a group may need to seek advice from a resource person or hire the services of a consultant. There may be professionals in the community or close by who are willing to donate their time, for example people affiliated with a local college, economic development organization or university.

For data analysis, a group should consider using software programs such as spread-sheets or a research database. Qualitative data can be analysed based on themes and frequency response. There are computer programs available to assist in qualitative analysis as well. One of the guidebooks listed in the reference section, called "Measuring Change in Rural Communities", by the Sonoran Institute (2001), provides many useful instructions and tips for statistical data gathering and analysis.

Once data collection and analysis is complete, it is time to put the results down on paper. The final report should describe the purpose of the assessment, information gathered, results of the analysis and conclusions reached.

Where to look for statistics about your community

- Statistics Canada Community Profiles
- Canadian Taxfilers
- Aboriginal Peoples Survey
- Aboriginal Children's Survey
- Community Information Database, Rural Secretariat
- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Maps
- The Atlas of Canada
- Provincial government departments (Statistics, Industry, Services, etc.)
- Regions and municipalities
- Health authorities and school districts

Smaller communities may not be represented within these statistical resources. If so, there are other sources of information that may prove useful. For example:
- Social service administration agencies
- Municipal tax assessment reports
- Employment insurance office
- Town hall

Case study of asset mapping exercise in Centreville, NB

The Falls Brook Centre, a non-profit organization situated in rural New Brunswick has developed specific expertise in community planning and regularly facilitates workshops using "asset mapping." Asset mapping is a group exercise that involves inventorying community assets, ranking the most highly valued ones and understanding why they are highly valued. The process also involves reflecting on what supports and threatens these highly valued assets.

According to Sophie-Michèle Cyr, coordinator of the program, one of the most rewarding aspects of Asset Mapping is the enthusiasm it generates amongst residents. Speaking about a workshop she facilitated in Centreville, N.B. she said, "It was pretty amazing.

The participants filled flip chart after flip chart. There's the trout stream. There's the community school. There's the community theater. They got really excited looking at all those flip charts. People were just astonished at what their community had to offer".

In the Centreville case, the participants agreed on a number of threats facing the community, such as youth out-migration, a diminishing work ethic, globalization and an overly high dependence on potato farming. A number of strategies were identified to tackle these issues, for example the creation of a job bank and a job fair to help connect young people with employers in the region, a mentorship program to foster entrepreneurialism amongst young people and the development of a community garden at the school to build skills and self-sufficiency.

For more information see: Falls Brook Centre, Community Asset Mapping
http://www.fallsbrookcentre.ca/community/mapping.htm

STEP 6 – Evaluate your process

It is always instructive to evaluate a community assessment exercise. In asking questions such as those described below, a group can refine their process for the next time, or leave good advice for the next group.

- Did the group work well together? Why or why not?
- Were the objectives of the exercise appropriate?
- Were the right methods selected?
- Did the process have adequate resources?
- Was relevant information collected?
- What were the challenges?
- What could be done differently?

STEP 7 – Spread the message and come up with next steps

The completion of a community assessment is cause for celebration. It marks the end of an intensive effort, often involving considerable volunteer hours on the part of participants. This is the time to take the results out into the community and consider next steps. Some people will have heard about the community assessment, or participated in the research process; they will be curious to learn about the results. This is also an opportunity to raise awareness for the project and gather ideas on possible 'next steps' and build support.

There are many ways to summarize and present information from a community assessment. Some communities might choose to hold public presentations or to host a workshop, others might write a series of articles for the local newspaper or publish a newsletter or webpage on the subject. There might also be opportunities for participants to appear on local radio or television.

This is also a great opportunity to solicit feedback on the results and to invite community members to participate in the formulation of next steps. Community assessments often lead to many new ideas for community projects. Some groups continue to meet regularly after an assessment to act on new ideas. It is likely that any project born

out of a community assessment will require considerable participation and support from the community.

The end of a community assessment is also an opportunity to bring your results to external organizations, and to take this as an opportunity to discuss ideas and opportunities with these groups. The results of the assessment can provide compelling evidence to government, for example, for the need to invest in new programs or services for the community. They will likely play a supportive role in many projects initiated by community members.

STEP 8 – Consider a follow-up assessment

If undertaken periodically, a community assessment can become a type of monitoring exercise. By replicating the same methods again and again, the community is able to chart their progress in meeting community goals. The first assessment becomes the baseline for those that follow. Groups interested in monitoring should consider developing thresholds or benchmarks for success.

Conclusion – Share Your Experience with Us

The Canadian Model Forest Network (CMFN) aims to create practical tools for rural and resource-dependent communities. This resource guide was envisioned as a tool that could help forest communities navigate the process of community assessment. Experience has shown that these types of exercises can be very beneficial in uniting local residents in the pursuit of common goals. Community assessments are helpful not only for communities that have already experienced setbacks, but also those seeking to anticipate future challenges and to take a pro-active stance.

It is our hope that the resource guide will find its way to many communities across Canada, and that it will inspire residents to join forces in support of new initiatives, both in research and action. As we have seen, there are many types of community assessments, and some can be undertaken with minimal time and effort, as an exercise to get ideas flowing. Other assessments are more intensive, but the reward is the greater breadth of information that results. What they all have in common is their

ability to enhance local understanding of a community's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities – an important step towards planning and action.

The CMFN would like to know about your experience using the guide. What worked? What did not? What did you learn about your community? What types of projects or initiatives emerged from the process of community assessment? There are many stories to be shared, which can in turn help to motivate other communities facing similar challenges. We would love to hear from you.

Email us!

cmfn@cmfn-rcfm.ca

5.1 Guidebooks on Conducting Community Assessment

Guidebooks provide the closest thing to "one stop shopping" when it comes to community assessment. Each has a specific approach, complete with a framework and measurement system. In this section, we present five we consider pertinent. All but one is focused on rural contexts. For each we describe the purpose and approach, and detail strengths and weaknesses.

Measuring Community Capacity Building: A Workbook-in-progress for Rural Communities
Author: The Aspen Institute

Purpose:
This guidebook is designed to measure a community's progress in building its capacity, defined as "the combined influence of a community's commitment, resources and skills that can be deployed to build on community strength and address community problems and opportunities." The guidebook is aimed at local citizens or leaders interested in supporting the capacity-building process.

Approach:
The guidebook outlines a series of eight desirable outcomes for communities, which form the framework for the measurement exercise. These are: 1) expanding, diverse, inclusive citizen participation 2) expanding leadership base 3) strengthened individual skills 4) widely shared vision and under-standing, 5) strategic community agenda 6) consistent, tangible progress towards goals 7) more effective community organizations and institutions 8) better resource utilization by the community. A series of indicators

and measures are proposed for each of these outcomes, which if tracked over time can show progress towards enhancing capacity.

Strengths and Weaknesses:
The advantage of this guidebook is that it provides a very detailed list of indicators, sub-indicators and measures. These are highly relevant and provide a thorough portrait of a community's status for each outcome. On the other hand, these are not generally indicators for which there is an existing data source. There is, therefore, likely to be considerable cost and effort associated with data collection. There are also few baselines for these indicators, therefore without repeat measurement, communities may find interpretation of results challenging.

The Community Resilience Manual
Author: the Centre for Community Enterprise

Purpose:
This manual is designed to allow rural communities to assess their state of resilience and establish priorities for strengthening it. A resilient community is defined as "one that takes intentional action to enhance the personal and collective capacity of its citizens and institutions to respond to, and influence the course of social and economic change." The manual was developed for economically-distressed small towns in rural BC and was field-tested in several sites. A companion document called the "Tools & Techniques for Community Recovery and Renewal" describe best practices from the field of community economic development.

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Approach:
The manual takes a step-by-step approach that includes: assessing community resilience, creating a portrait of community resilience, selecting local priorities and creating a plan.

A portrait of community resilience covers four dimensions of community life 1) People 2) Organizations 3) Resources and 4) Processes. The model outlines 23 resilience characteristics that express a community's capacity to shape its own ways of life and work. Examples include diversity of leadership, community pride, community co-operation, support for education, diversified employment, and local ownership of businesses. A series of indicators are proposed for each characteristic that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data. The manual provides a variety of other tools such as sample invitations, sample presentations, a sample survey and interview questions.

Strengths and Weaknesses:
This manual is one of the most detailed and complete available on the Internet. In using the worksheets, communities are provided with a step-by-step process for assessing their resilience. The manual is written in an accessible and friendly manner. It is also one of the few manuals that adequately addresses the topic of qualitative research methods. However, it should be understood that to undertake the resilience assessment in its entirety is a relatively intensive process, requiring between 30 to 40 days over a 3-4 month period.

Concertation locale : les clefs de success. Ch. 8 L'évaluation de la communauté: un outil clef pour la mobilization et la participation
Author: Réseau québécois des villes et villages en santé

Purpose:
This is a French guide. The purpose is to set out a process by which community leaders can gather useful information from community residents on priority issues, obstacles to solving these and possible solutions. The process is also designed to engage the community in the process and potentially recruit new members.

Approach:
The process is led by a committee of community leaders and is based around a series of community meetings, where as many local residents as possible are encouraged to attend. Data is collected from these meetings about community issues, its history, strengths, resources and obstacles to problem-resolution. Attendees can also provide ideas on how to resolve these issues. The information collected at these meetings serves to orient the strategy and planning of the committee.

Strengths and Weaknesses:
The guide provides a simple step-by-step approach towards engaging a broad spectrum of people in a community evaluation. In this respect it is unique. The guide could be enhanced by a few real-world examples. Keep in mind that undertaking this process would also require strong facilitation skills on the part of those conducting the exercise. This organization has other practical tools as well, for example in project evaluation.

Rural Community Health and Well-being: A Guide to Action. (Ch 3)
Author: the Rural Development Institute, Brandon University

Purpose:
The assessment tool is part of a larger guide to community engagement and action. Chapter 3 presents the Community Health Action Model, designed to allow rural communities to assess their health, understand

the fit of their community within the broader environment, and identify activities required to achieve community goals.

Approach:
The Community Health Action Model, shaped like a flower, encompasses the social, economic and environmental realms. The ten flower petals represent different categories and each is associated with a series of indicators. The framework and indicators were tested in two pilot projects in Manitoba communities. The categories are: health, safety and security, economics, education, environment, community infrastructure, recreation and heritage and arts, community processes, social supports, and population. There are more than 115 indicators associated with these categories, including some qualitative and some quantitative. Worksheets are included which facilitate indicator calculation.

Strength and Weaknesses:
The advantage of this tool is the breadth of categories and the vast array of indicators that are presented. In addition, many of the indicators are based on information readily available from Statistics Canada. The worksheets are also helpful for groups with less data analysis experience. The disadvantage is the layout of the guide, which is text heavy and not particularly appealing.

Community Assessment Handbook
Author: City of Calgary

Purpose:
Much like our resource guide, the purpose of the city of Calgary's manual is to articulate the key elements and processes for conducting a community assessment and provide tools and resources. According to the manual "It is intended to provide a framework and tools for actively learning about a community's needs and strengths and then setting priorities." The project website provides case studies of

asset mapping exercises conducted by Falls Brook Centre.

Approach:
This guide describes the basic elements of a community assessment. It touches on some theoretical approaches including the Social Planning Model, the Social Action Model, and the Locality Development Model. It also provides guidance in data collection, centered on three categories: 1) statistical data, 2) community perspectives, 3) community resources and assets. Worksheets are provided to help with data collection such as a checklist of statistical information and questions to guide qualitative data collection. The guide also provides questions to help orient follow-up discussions.

Strength and Weaknesses:
The guide is a good tool for communities looking to design their own assessment. It does not provide a specific measurement framework, but rather does a good job of describing concepts, approaches and techniques of community assessment. Some basic statistical measures are offered. The on-line format is somewhat cumbersome, however a print copy is available for purchase.

Community Health Indicators Toolkit
Author: First Nations Health Development Project, Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit, University of Regina and University of Saskatchewan

Purpose:
This toolkit presents a framework and indicators that are designed to help First Nations communities measure progress on improving community health.

Approach:
The evaluation framework includes 6 domains: economic viability, environment, identity and culture, food security, services

and infrastructure, and healthy lifestyles. Each is associated with a series of indicator categories as well as important individual health and addiction issues affecting the wellness of the community. Users of the toolkit are therefore invited to select indicator categories, with associated issue areas and proposed indicators. Data sheets and instruction on potential data sources are also provided.

Strengths and weaknesses:
The toolkit is very complete. It provides users with specific instructions on how and what to track in the area of community health, broadly defined. The toolkit is designed for First Nations communities and as such, the indicators are very relevant to these communities. The structure of the evaluation is multi-layered, and looks to require some research experience in order to implement. Also, because the indicators are specific to First Nations, many require local surveys in order to implement.

Sustainable Communities: A Guide to Community Asset Mapping
Author: Falls Brook Centre

Purpose:
The overall goal of the initiative is to support sustainable community revitalization. The guide provides a step-by-step description of asset mapping, a common approach used in community development. According to the guide, asset mapping aims to "look at the dimensions of the current situation and to identify community strengths and weak-nesses which will help or hinder its transformation to a more diverse economy."

Approach:
Asset mapping is not about measurement, but about identifying what assets the community has at its disposal and how these assets might be used to improve the situation. The assets are divided into the categories of natural

assets, built assets, social assets, economic assets, public assets (services) and intangible assets (undiscovered or underutilized assets). Asset mapping is a group exercise that involves inventorying community assets, ranking the most highly valued ones and understanding why they are highly valued. The process also involves reflecting on what supports and threatens these highly valued assets. A follow up session serves to helps determine goals and plan projects.

Strengths and Weaknesses:
Unlike some of the other handbooks described here, asset mapping is a relatively quick and easy exercise that can identify important community issues and priorities with a minimum of effort. Nor does it require a lot of money or a formal organization. This guide does a good job of describing this approach in simple and enthusiastic terms.

Note: A complementary guidebook, called "Asset Mapping: A Handbook" by Fuller et al. 2002 describes two other asset mapping approaches, the heritage approach (looks at key physical assets) and the storytelling approach (uses stories to extract key assets, resources and best practices).

Measuring Community Success and Sustainability: An Interactive Workbook
Author: the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development

Purpose:
This workbook describes a process to help communities learn how to measure the concrete results of rural community development and conservation efforts.

Approach:
The workbook is organized around 5 outcomes: 1) increased use of the skills, knowledge and ability of local people 2) strengthened relationships and commun-ication 3) improved community initiative,

responsibility and adaptability 4) sustainable, healthy ecosystems with multiple community benefits 5) appropriately diverse and healthy economies. For each outcome, the workbook provides examples of indicators and measures, and instructions on how to create a measurement plan, case studies and year-end assessments.

Strengths and weaknesses:
This workbook provides a great deal of information about indicators and data collection. It draws on a wide variety of case studies to illustrate methods. However, most of the indicators presented rely on first-hand data collection (surveys, interviews, etc.). This workbook is therefore better aimed at a well-resourced group that has previous research expertise.

5.2 Resources on Collaboration and Consensus-Building

Working together effectively as a group is an important part of conducting a community assessment. Before getting started, a group might want to seek advice on how to encourage collaboration and consensual decision-making. Here are a few useful texts.

Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Putting Principles into Practice
Author: the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy

This report sets out a series of guiding principles for the process of consensus-building in project and program implementation. In addition to describing the principles (for example inclusivity, equal opportunity, self-design, etc.), the report also provides specific advice on how to put these ideas into practice. For example, on the issue of conflict, a series of alternative approaches to dispute resolution are presented. In short, the guide serves to remind us of the important questions to ask when designing a consensual process and helps navigate many of the thorny issues.

Community Decision-Making Tool Kit
Author: The Rural Secretariat, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

This tool kit describes a dozen simple techniques to aid groups in generating ideas, prioritizing, and weighing options, such as brainstorming, the charette procedure, and multivoting. Another feature are a series of case studies, submitted by communities, describing their own experience in decision-making and some of the specific benefits and pitfalls of using these different approaches. A section, called "good ideas", highlights innovative decision-making approaches used by communities.

Concertation Locale : Les Clefs du succès
Author: Réseau québécois des Villes et Villages en santé

This document is available in French. It provides practical advice on how to build local collaborative processes. The first sections provide advice on coalition building (success factors, obstacles, issues of multi-culturalism, conflict resolution). The next sections deal with citizen engagement. The document concludes with advice on elaborating action plans and evaluation.

**Participatory Methods Toolkit:
A Practitioners Manual**
Author: the King Baudouin Foundation and the Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment.

This is a toolkit for focused on participatory methods. After setting out some general guidelines for conducting participatory projects, the remainder of the toolkit focuses on presenting thirteen methods and techniques (each accompanied by an in-depth fiche). These methods include the 21st century town meeting, the expert panel, focus group, scenario building exercise and world café.

Tools and Techniques to Consensus Building
Author: Resolve

This web-based resource provides an overview of consensus building concepts and techniques. This document pays particular attention to mediation practice and the role of the mediator. Specific tools used in mediation are presented, such as ground rules and participation agreements.

5.3 Resources for Community Indicators

There are numerous organizations in Canada, both government and non-profit based, that have built indicator frameworks to assess community well-being. The geographic scale varies – some are national in scope, while others are regional or local. Many are designed to measure progress towards a series of goals or desired outcomes such as economic diversification, affordable housing, community infrastructure or access to clean drinking water. These indicators can be borrowed directly, or adapted for the purpose of a community assessment. Below, are several projects, primarily Canadian, which can provide ideas for indicator selection.

Indicators of Well-being in Canada
By: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

Provides a wide variety of quantitative indicators that describe the well-being of Canadians. Indicator results are presented at provincial and national levels.

Canadian Index of Wellbeing
By: Canadian Index of Wellbeing Network

A new initiative that aims to report on quality of life of Canadians. The Index is based around eight categories: community vitality, democratic engagement, education, environment, healthy populations, leisure and culture, living standards and time use.

National Quality of Life Indicators
By: Canadian Policy Research Networks

Provides a set of national quality of life indicators. The development of the indicators involved broad-based consultations with Canadians. Nine themes and forty indicators were selected.

Indicateurs québécois de développement durable : document synthèse, August 2010
By: Ministère du Développement durable, de l'Environnement et des Parcs

The result of vast consultations, these are a series of sustainability indicators produced

by the government of Quebec. Indicators are organized around the themes of human capital, social capital, financial capital, producer capital, and natural capital.

Quality of Life Reporting System (QOLRS)
By: Canadian Federation of Municipalities

The QOLRS is designed to measure and report on quality of life in Canada's largest cities and communities. It contains hundreds of variables that measure changes in 10 domains. The reporting system is also used to publish thematic reports, which examine specific local trends.

Tableau de bord sur l'état de la région du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean
By: Centre québécois de développement durable

This evaluation framework presents forty indicators used to assess well-being in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region. The indicators cover seven sectors: human development, culture, environment, social, economy, management of resources and the territory.

Vers des communautés durables et en santé : grille d'analyse de projet
By: Réseau québecois des Villes et Villages en santé

This guide is designed to help evaluate the sustainability of projects; however, the checklist is equally applicable to communities. It provides a series of questions for project managers to consider under the categories of social pole, economic pole, and ecological pole. Some of these can be reconfigured as indicators.

Sustainability Indicator Research
By: Sustainable Calgary

A grassroots collaborative initiative, which embarked on a project to identify, research and report on a set of community sustainability indicators. A set of thirty-six indicators was selected. Since 1996 over 2000 Calgarians have been a part of the process of selecting and documenting these indicators.

Indicators of Community Sustainability
By: University of Wisconsin-Extension

Over two hundred indicators are grouped according to the themes of economy and individuals, business, agriculture and natural resources, education, environment, and government.

5.4 Statistical Resources at the Community Level

It is very common for community assessments to integrate statistical data, for example about the economy, demographics, or housing. Many community indicators make use of these types of statistics. There are some excellent sources for statistical data at the community level, such as the census. The following section describes some important sources of community-level information in Canada available on-line.

Federal government sources:

Statistics Canada Community Profiles

Statistics Canada is the premiere source of data on communities in Canada. It undertakes a census every five years, the most recent being 2011. Community Profiles present census information for more than 5,000 communities as well as metropolitan areas. The census covers a variety of socio-economic

characteristics including demographics, real estate, employment, income, household characteristics, language and ethnicity. Census data is available free-of-charge on the Internet for the years 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011. Previous years are available at many libraries.

Statistics Canada also publishes the Census Dictionary. It provides definitions for all concepts, variables and geographic terms. The 2011 version is available on the Internet.

Another source of data available from Statistics Canada is tax file data, called Canadian Taxfilers. This service provides information on income and employment based on individual tax returns. Data can be requested for postal walks, forward sortation areas, rural postal codes, cities and selected census areas. A small fee is charged for access to this data.

Aboriginal Peoples Survey

Statistics Canada publishes a national survey of Aboriginal peoples (First Nations living off-reserve, Métis and Inuit) every 5 years. It includes a broad array of topics such as education, language, labour activity, housing, family background, Aboriginal identity and ancestry and health.

Aboriginal Children's Survey

Statistics Canada publishes a survey on the health and development of Aboriginal children under the age of 6. It covers topics such as child's health, sleep, nutrition, development, nurturing, child care, school, language, behaviour and activities. Some information is collected on the child's parents or guardians and their community.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Maps

The website of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada provides interactive maps portraying land, soil, water, climate and biodiversity resources in Canada. There are several maps featuring agricultural activity, drawn from the Canadian Census of Agriculture (2006). The Agri-environmental indicators series reports on the agriculture sector's environmental performance.

Community Information Database

The Rural Secretariat manages the Community Information Database (CID), a web-based resource that provides socio-economic and demographic data for Canadian communities. According to the website, 500 pieces of data are available about Canadian communities. Information is viewable in map-based form at a variety of spatial scales. In addition, data is presented in graphic form for each census subdivision, including 10-year trends. Although the CID draws heavily on data from Statistics Canada, other data sources are also available. For example, theme-based indicators draw from the Census of Agriculture, the Canadian Community Health Survey, Parks Canada and the Co-operatives Secretariat. Tutorials are available online.

The Atlas of Canada

The Atlas of Canada, hosted by Natural Resources Canada's website, presents a map-based data at regional and community levels. A wide variety of variables are covered including environment, economy, history and health. For example, under the category forests there are 17 maps alone, including forest-reliant communities and a sawmills map. There is also a series of maps depicting data from the 2006 census, which can be accessed at the community, regional or national level. These cover a series of topics such as Aboriginal population, language, the labour force, housing, income and education.

Provincial sources:

British Columbia
- Community Facts (BC Stats)
- Socio-economic profiles (BC Stats)

Saskatchewan
- Saskbiz (Enterprise Saskatchewan)

Manitoba
- Manitoba Bureau of Statistics
- Community Profiles (Manitoba Government)

Ontario
- Community Indicators (Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition)

Quebec
- L'Institut de la statistique du Québec

Prince Edward Island
- Community Accounts (Quality of Island Life Cooperative)

Nova Scotia
- Community Counts (Economics and Statistics Division)
- Municipal Indicators (Service Nova Scotia, Municipal Relations)

Newfoundland and Labrador
- Community Accounts

Regional and Municipal Data:

Some regional organizations like regional health authorities and school districts collect information on their populations.

Some municipal offices collect or provide data on socio-economic issues. Furthermore, many municipalities have undertaken planning and consultation initiatives, which can provide interesting data about the community. Consulting previous community plans, for example, can provide useful insight into the changing nature of the community and the types and strategies and policies developed by local leaders to address challenges.

5.5 Techniques for Gathering Community Perspectives

Interviews:
Interviews are one-on-one conversations that aim to elicit the perspective of individuals on a given topic. Interviews are often differentiated by the degree to which they are formalized (unstructured, semi-structured to structured). Unstructured interviews might revolve around a few themes with no specific questions, while structured interviews abide by a strict set of questions delivered in a specific order. Another type of interview is the key informant interview – meaning one that targets someone with specialized knowledge on the research subject.

Focus groups:
Focus groups are also described as a type of interview, however this time with a small group (usually between 6 and 12 individuals). The distinguishing feature of the focus group is the interaction that occurs between participants, which can generate additional insights and reflections. Focus groups usually rely on a moderator to keep the conversation on track.

Community forum (also called a town hall meeting):
Community forums are larger gatherings of community members. While they are harder to moderate, they nonetheless offer a good opportunity for residents to voice their concerns and be heard. There are innovative techniques available for structuring conversation in this type of setting, such as the "world café", which offers a set of design principles for hosting meaningful conversations.

Surveys:
Surveys are a structured way of gathering information that describes, compares or explain knowledge, attitude and behaviour.

They usually involve a written set of questions, which are either filled out directly by residents or administered by a surveyor in person or over the phone. There are several types of surveys. Case study surveys target a specific part of the population without aiming to represent everyone. Sampled surveys target a proportion of the population to represent the views of everyone. Finally, census surveys target the entire population.

Asset mapping:
This technique is described in the section on guidebooks. It involves inventorying the skills, services and capacities of the community. Some use a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) format.

For further reading on these qualitative methods consult the following sources:

- USAID evaluation publications - see 'conducting key informant interviews' and 'conducting focus group interviews' (USAID)

- Focus group tips for beginners (Texas Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Literacy)

- Conducting in-depth interviews: A guide for designing and conducting in-depth interviews for evaluation input (Pathfinder International)

- Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide (Family Health International)

- The organization of hope: A workbook for rural asset-based community development (Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University)

- Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets (Kretzman and McKnight)

- How to conduct surveys: a step-by-step guide (Fink)

5.6 Tools Designed for Assessment of Environmental Dimensions

The Natural Step Framework

The Natural Step is a non-profit organization that promotes a distinct, science-based model for sustainability planning. The Natural Step Framework is based on systems thinking (everything is interconnected) and promotes the idea of back casting (imagine a successful outcome in the future and plan accordingly). The organization has recently developed a tool, called the Municipal Sustainability Assessment and Road Map, which integrates organizational assessment, development of strategic targets and a process for reaching these. Sustainability training programs for local leaders and organizers are offered. A book is also available for purchase called The Natural Step for Communities, which highlights case studies of communities that have made major changes towards sustainability.

Ecological Footprint Analysis

Ecological footprint analysis aims to measure the impact of humans on nature. It measures what individuals (or communities) consume from nature, and provides an estimate of the area of land that would be necessary to sustain current consumption levels. As such, it illustrates the degree to which people are living within (or beyond) the carrying capacity of their environment. The approach can also be used to calculate the footprints for various policy or program options, and thereby help estimate the ecological impact of various planning choices.

Community Environmental Health Assessment Workbook.
By the Environmental Law Institute

Although designed for urban communities, this workbook has relevance for rural communities as well. It focuses on the idea of environmental health. The workbook presents an approach to environmental health assessment that is based on identifying, analyzing and ranking environmental health hazards and problems in a community. These issues provide the basis for setting community priorities and devising an action plan.

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Notes

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