

e-DIALOGUE
Sustainable Communities in Canada: Does One Exist?

Summary

Ensuring safe water supplies, coping with crumbling infrastructure and overburdened transportation systems, diversifying from single resource economies—these are just some of the challenges now facing Canadian communities. From rapid urban growth to declining rural populations, from clean air to health care, communities across the country are dealing with complex issues that require unprecedented levels of interdisciplinary research, collaboration and co-operation. Twelve experts came together on December 2-4, 2002, to dialogue around the meaning of sustainable community development in Canada, moderated by Ann Dale, Professor, Science, Technology and Environment Division, Royal Roads University.

Common themes quickly emerged around the necessity for sustainable livelihoods, perhaps independent of place; reciprocity and balance; as well as the ability to make informed decisions based on critical infrastructure choices. Panelists discussed whether or not ‘healthy communities’ have the ‘right’ to impact adjacent ecosystems and communities, and that perhaps “a sustainable community is one where its residents give back as much as they take?” While panelists raised examples of ‘sustainable communities’, it also became clear that these might be better described as ‘communities of sustainable practices’.

Discussing types of place, particularly urban and rural, panelists identified key structural attributes common to strong communities everywhere—connectivity or connectedness (physical, virtual and social); complexity; diversity; malleability or adaptability; access, and infrastructure choices. ‘Neighbourhood’ rather than community was the preferred term to identify the scale of relationship and meaning to both urban and rural contexts.

In terms of scale, many panelists agreed that the size of cities was not innately problematic, rather the key challenge is managing growth and developing the right structures and systems to ‘deliberately’ plan and manage at a bioregional level for sustainable development. However, several expressed concern that there might be ultimate limits to growth if we grow beyond ‘consciousness of place’, that is, the ability of a region to support water, food, and waste demands.

Another point of consensus was the need for connectedness in design, in the coming together of different ‘expertises’ in a community in the planning process to ‘deliberately design’ for sustainability. Community engagement was seen as essential, engaging such key players as banks, developers and insurance companies. Community dialogues were also seen as complimentary for re-engaging in ‘shared meaning’ and common values—the shared norms—that are the starting point for any form of community empowerment.

Suggestions for possible business engagement strategies included involving small business owners in multistakeholder processes; linking energy conservation with job creation and innovation; providing sustainable technology funding at the local level; educating and raising awareness concerning impacts and alternatives to current practices; and having businesses begin at ‘home’ with green building/operations initiatives.

A question was raised on the first day regarding leverage points, that is, the path of least resistance to achieving change. While the panelists identified several areas, by the final day it became clear that transportation might be the first area of leverage, though it would require a much greater integration of transportation planning with urban design and policy development, including designating land use and activity patterns in conjunction with their level of accessibility.

Important tools supporting these leverage points included ecological footprinting; long-term integrated systems approaches; closed loop systems; linked communities for resource recovery; lifecycle consumption/emission reporting; limits; diversity; empowerment and capacity building. One particular tool emphasized as key to sustainable community development was bioregionalism that highlights the interdependence of communities and regions. It was seen as critical for bridging the urban-rural divide, a means of recognizing that decisions made in an urban context have downstream rural impacts.