Community Capacity

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Introduction

From January through June 2015, the Co-operative Innovation Project held community engagement meetings across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. We invited a total of 13 Aboriginal[†] and 50 rural communities to attend one of 26 meetings. In all, we had conversations with over 400 individuals in these communities, including youth, senior citizens, parents, business owners, public officials, community volunteers, community development workers, co-op sector representatives, and interested citizens.

The following summary provides a high level overview of what participants across rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada identified as possible and alternative solutions to meet the needs identified in each locale. As well, during the discussions, participants spoke of opportunities and barriers that would help or hinder communities in their search for locally robust solutions. *Please note: these summaries only represent the opinions and perceptions of the people in attendance at the meetings.* Nonetheless, they offer a significant new source of data on what communities in rural and Aboriginal western Canada identify as the most important, critical, and practical changes necessary to make life in western Canada better. The community meetings became a snapshot of current thoughts and trends in rural and Aboriginal western Canada, a critical gauge of community-level viewpoints.

This chapter provides an overview of community capacity in rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada, as expressed to CIP during community engagement events. When appropriate, direct quotations are used in italics, to showcase community voices on a range of local issues.

Methodology

A note taker, acting in a similar capacity to a meeting secretary, took notes on the conversations and discussions of each focus group. The discussions were not digitally recorded. Each facilitator also wrote field notes for each community visit, which often captured conversations that would occur during coffee and snack breaks, or other connections with community members. In all, the twenty-six meetings generated 73 sets of field notes, and 74 sets of note taker notes. Each participant also produced a map, and a chart of the relationship between local needs and local capacity to meet those needs.

The first part of each meeting consisted of a facilitated discussion to brainstorm as many community needs as possible, from deep systemic needs to identifying gaps that, if filled, would increase social interaction and quality of life for community members. (For an explanation and overview of what communities in rural and Aboriginal western Canada reported, see the previous chapter).

In the second part of every community meeting, facilitators used the needs identified by each focus group to guide discussion. Community members considered how these needs could be met. First,

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[†] The Co-operative Innovation Project uses the term "Aboriginal" to denote Canada's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. This usage reflects contemporary census and other documentation which provide source citations throughout this project. We honour and respect the identities of each of Canada's communities.

the discussion focused on whether these needs could be met through conventional solutions, such as new business creation or ventures, existing or new volunteer activities, or government intervention.

Participants also examined the potential of alternative solutions, particularly the co-operative model, to meet community needs that could not be adequately addressed in other ways. The participants easily identified co-operative solutions to at least one, and usually several, local needs. In some cases, the co-operative solution was preferred over the potential conventional solution, since co-operatives can support higher levels of local control and alignment with local needs and capacities.

After an examination of possible solutions, the discussion moved to broader questions around community capacity. Does your community support new ideas? Is there a strong sense of community? How supportive is your community of people coming together to address community needs? Does your community face any challenges or barriers in pursuing community solutions? Does this community work well together? Does it work well with nearby communities? These questions were designed to bring forth a discussion at a larger level about community characteristics, and if that community's citizens had the capacity to work together. These conversations offered insight into both the social and the business capacity of rural and Aboriginal communities across western Canada.

Finally, participants were asked to chart their sense of both community needs (on a range of low to high) and community capacity to solve those needs (on a range of low to high). The meetings then ended with a draw for a gift certificate, and closing remarks.

All of these notes were analyzed to find themes in the conversations and across the communities. Notes were uploaded to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis platform that allows researchers to analyze rich, text-based information. Two CIP team members, working independently, would analyze each source (whether note taker notes or field notes written by community event leads). NVivo allows rich narrative data to be 'coded' according to themes that are brought forward by participants. For example, each time a participant referenced 'government' as the entity to provide a solution, the note was coded to 'government' and sub-coded to federal, provincial, municipal, or band level.

Possible Solutions

Figure 1 Word Cloud Possible Solutions. CIP community meetings 2015

After participants had brainstormed needs in the community, facilitators created a combined list of the needs common to all discussion groups in that meeting. Participants were then asked to consider who is in a position to solve the needs: business or entrepreneur; one or more levels of government; non-profit organizations; or something else.

| Community Needs | CONVENTIONAL SOLUTIONS | | | 40+ |
	Direct Action by a Business Entrepreneur	Direct Government Action (Local, Provincial, Federal, Aboriginal)	Direct Action by an Existing Volunteer Group	Other
1. YOUTH/REC ?	✓	Yes	✓	
2. Rec - adult {				
3. MEETING SPACES	Catering group (CO-OP)	X	Legion	
4. EC DEV	~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~			
5. INTERNET/PHONE	Could be business	⊗ local gov't		
6. AMBULANCE		Gov't X		
7. PROTECTIVE		X	Neighbours Watch / Citizens on Patrol Advisory	
8. KEEP WEALTH HERE				
9. Affordable seniorsservices)	entrepreneurs ✓	Municipal Provincial ✓	Snow angels	
10.				

Figure 2 Conventional Solutions poster, unidentified community meeting, CIP 2015

In general, participants at our meetings were very concerned about the realism and sustainability of any potential solution. In some cases, communities and individuals within communities have tried various solutions. Some of these attempts have provided knowledge of what may or may not work in their community. For most of the needs, people felt that few of the conventional actors would provide a solution on their own — at least, not in the short term.

Role of Business or an Entrepreneur

During the meetings, participants could readily identify needs that could be solved by business, or that potentially could provide a role for business. Most rural and Aboriginal communities have potential for an entrepreneur to invest in their community, but there hasn't been a rush to their door. The key word, used from Manitoba to British Columbia, was *attract. "It came down to money: there is a real need to capture local capital, or to attract capital, into the region."* Attracting new industry to open up a large-scale business — of whatever kind — in the region seemed the most exciting solution. The reality, though, fell short: "*This seemed more like winning a lottery."*

Participants were not willing to open competing businesses. There are few enough differentiated businesses, let alone having enough clientele for two in competition, depending on the size of the community. *"Not financially feasible for an entrepreneur."* Others looked for regional development and co-operation with nearby communities to ensure all communities in their area had opportunity for growth. *"Closing distance through community is working well, but when it comes time to build something new, the question becomes, where to build it?"*

Participants noted the role and impact of ingrained community barriers on new development. When people do move into town to open or operate a business, there can be a disconnect between the expectations of residents and the new operators.

Communities with a larger current pool of business development were, overall, stronger proponents that business could play a role than communities with few to no local businesses. In general, people felt that businesses using a traditional business model could be a solution, in some cases, but not all. "*They had a great handle on business solutions, however most of [this] community's needs were social, they were unable to connect business to a solution for the social needs.*"

Role of Volunteers and Non-profits

In most communities, non-profits or the volunteer sector were viewed as the delivery arm to meet needs in the community, particularly around recreation, culture and entertainment, or certain community-based services. *"Challenges like seniors housing and recreational activities were stated as areas for volunteers to act."* In other cases, transportation and childcare solutions often came through family volunteerism.

However, there is volunteer burn-out and an aging volunteer base across western Canada. Participants clearly noted that a growing absence in the volunteer sector will hamper the ability of volunteers or formal volunteer groups to meet needs. Participants felt that volunteers and non-profits had many of the skills to meet needs, but lacked the capacity or resources to do so.

Role of Government

Participants clearly looked to governments to provide funding, organization, and favourable regulatory environments for their communities to thrive. *"Government needs to get involved."* Yet, there was skepticism: government, particularly federal and provincial level support, would not be forthcoming to address needs. *"Government support in rural areas is virtually non-existent now."* Aboriginal communities are particularly frustrated by their experiences with the federal government and do not believe real action will come from that level. Rural communities feel forgotten in favour of urban hubs.

Participants mentioned other barriers to receiving government help besides a lack of political voice. Since most government support to rural and Aboriginal communities is viewed in financial terms — as one participant put it, *"Action on this would need to be government funded"* — the work associated with grant writing to access funds is considered a barrier.

Participants are also aware of a double-edged sword for government funding: services and outcomes are tied to the governments' requirements or measuring mechanisms which are often not what the community feels would be most effective in their community. But, if successful in their grant application, the money would allow the local government or non-profit (whichever entity applied for the grant) to provide *something* for their community.

Community meeting participants felt that communities need a regulation expert to help them navigate through the complex regulatory systems they have to work with in order to meet their needs on their own.

The following records the kinds of conversations provided by participants around each level of government.

1. Federal Government

In Aboriginal communities, the link to the federal government is much stronger than that in the rural communities. In some cases, Aboriginal communities spoke of working directly with government Ministers to solve issues: *"Need to get all Ministers together in the same room on all the issues. Health, social services, education and justice — need them to sit together."* The rocky relationship with Aboriginal communities is well documented, and need not be re-explained here except to say that great distrust exists towards the federal government as a result of long-standing colonialist policies including the Indian Act and residential school experiences. Participants in Aboriginal communities felt their hands were tied in what they could do, and did not trust that the federal government had their best interests at heart.

Rural communities mainly viewed federal linkages through funding possibilities and regulations, including policy environments. And this view is not positive: *"There is a great distrust of the provincial and national level of governments to understand their needs and communities."*

2. Provincial Government

Communities looked to the provincial government primarily for funding, to develop favourable regulations, and support development agencies that work in rural areas including Community Futures and regional economic development agencies. Areas of particular concern include education, rural health regions, and services related to both of these. Centralization in regional hub centres was a popular comment: *Provincial government centralizes things into cities to save money."*

3. Local/Band Governments

Participants in the meetings saw local governments as having the most impact on their community, and an important actor (either directly or through indirect support) in any movement for change. This level of government must build connections to and between other levels of government and look for opportunities. Lobbying other levels of government is a central role. *"Local leadership are trying hard to change the issues with housing and land. We'd be worse off if our leadership didn't work so hard."* Rural communities feel that the provincial government is the most likely partner for funding and support, while Aboriginal communities are looking to the federal government.

Yet, local government was often cited as a community barrier – as a participant at one of the meetings indicated, *"The municipal government is inhibiting a builder from doing his work."* Because local governments are drawn directly from community members, local politics and leadership always has an important impact on the activities that are carried out locally. Even so, participants clearly recognized the critical role of local government in addressing local needs, and being part of any solutions process.

Multiple Players

The most exciting conversations occurred when participants started brainstorming how multiple actors could work together more effectively to meet needs. CIP found that when focus groups

during community meetings were able to identify more than one player necessary in finding a solution (e.g. the local non-profit hospital foundation and government working together to find a health solution, or the voluntary Chamber of Commerce working with a local business), they displayed a greater ability to envision locally-built solutions. *"The community is slowly creating partnerships, they are trying to learn how to work together to help each other."*

These communities seemed less likely to wait for an outside entity to come into the community to solve problems. In other words, communities that could imagine a scenario where more than one group was leveraged and involved to create a solution showed greater community capacity for problem-solving.

Alternative Solutions

Figure 3 Word Cloud Alternative Solutions. CIP community meetings 2015

After participants had considered conventional solutions to meeting needs in a community, they were asked to consider if alternative solutions, such as using a co-operative business model, might be successful in their community.

One of the main barriers to thinking about co-operatives as a solution is that people know the most common forms of a co-operative, but are not able to apply the model to other types of businesses. *"People have a limited understanding of what a co-op is. We know co-op groceries and gas, insurance, credit unions, but applying it elsewhere may be difficult."* Most participants that could identify a co-operative did not know how it is different from other business models and what the pros and cons are.

In each meeting, an explanation of the model was given, and communities were asked to consider which of their needs might be met using this model. Facilitators would often work with participants to help them understand how a co-operative could be applied in different situations.

General Comments

Once participants in the meetings got started thinking about co-operatives as a potential solution to meeting their needs, there was excitement. *"What would it take to get people going? Education, funding, people who start co-ops are people who believe in the model and have experience in it."* People intuitively understood that co-operatives offer a way for community members to come together to solve their own needs, harness the knowledge of many people, share its risks, and share the benefits. They felt it offered a potential way to reduce reliance on outside forces, such as the government, and put power and control in the community's hands. *"Using co-operatives to solve problems takes away relying on outside people/groups for help."*

Participants also knew that many of their needs have been increasing over time. Some needs are a result of recent demographic, economic, or societal changes, but many are a result of government restructuring of funding or programs, or changes in delivery mechanisms. There is a feeling that increased co-operation between members of communities and between communities is the only way to meet needs moving forward. *"As the needs become greater, it will force greater co-operation between people. Economy of scale how to get everyone together."*

Barriers to co-op development

There is skepticism from some community members that co-operatives are more likely to get started than other business models. *"Skeptical for co-ops to happen. Is lots of work and a long process to start, but would greatly benefit the community."* Leadership is essential to get things going. Co-operative education and knowledge building on the model is also necessary to ensure momentum. The business has to have a sound financial base and the community has to be open to trying and supporting something different.

1. Champions needed

Participants recognized how stretched community members are, that their volunteers are tired, and that their local governments are working to full capacity. A champion to drive a new project forward is crucial to its success, and participants quickly identified this challenge. *"You need someone to be your champion and it's hard to find a champion. All ideas are great, but until a person embraces it, it's hard to get it going." "Think it would be a good thing, and would be in favour, but it comes back to who is going to do the work."* Yet in almost every room, somebody stepped forward to say they would take the champion role if they had some support and help. *"For a co-op to be a*

success there would need to be a few key players spreading the word to get others passionate about things."

2. Lack of knowledge

"People don't know how/where to start." In both Aboriginal and rural communities, the co-operative DNA is being lost. Co-operatives have become an institution, not an active solution. Co-operatives are rarely studied in economic development or business courses. It takes time to learn new models – and not everyone has or can make the time. To fully embrace and start to use the co-operative model, communities and citizens require education of and knowledge about how the co-operative model could meet needs in different types of communities. Examples are a big help: *"Seniors housing and the need for it might be a prime example of pulling something together that might show how a co-op can really work — if we had an example to work on so that we can watch and see how it could work."*

Unless people understand why the co-op model is important, and what it offers that is different than conventional models, they will find the model hard to embrace. In Aboriginal communities, co-operative knowledge must be built that reflects both culture and practicality: "*Need more awareness within the First Nation communities. What does this mean and how is it going to help the communities. Until people understand, they aren't likely to participate because they don't understand."* If they do not embrace it, the co-op model will fail before it has a chance to begin.

3. Sustainability

Participants acknowledged that while co-operatives can exist in smaller communities and increase sustainability of the community where traditional businesses might fail, a rural or Aboriginal co-operative requires heavy buy-in from the local community. Start-up costs are a consideration. People need funding to develop the co-op, and financing to start the business. *"Cooperatives may be a possible solution, but everyone is on fixed income and wouldn't have any money to start a co-operative."* People will have to use the co-operative to keep it vibrant, and volunteers are required to sit on boards to sustain the co-operative.

Some participants felt that although there are needs in their communities, if it is possible to address them it is already in the works, or they worried any new initiative would interfere with other groups working to address the need. *"If it's not stepping on toes its already established."*

4. Community barriers/apathy

The attitude of a community and existing community barriers can be a challenge. *"Challenge to forming co-ops locally; already overcommitted/burned out."* If there is a belief that nothing can be done, it is unlikely the community will proceed. In some cases, if there are deep divides in a community, or if there have been previous attempts that have failed, people are unwilling to try again. *"Barriers would be jealousy, preventing it from happening, people feeling excluded."* If there are strong gatekeepers in a community, they may stop an idea from gaining any real momentum. *"Lots of politics and lots of competitiveness within and amongst these communities, which could act as a barrier to forming a co-operative."*

Some communities have had experiences with co-ops being closed or amalgamated against the community wishes, which have caused hard feelings. *"Their co-op foundered and closed, so their perception is well aware of the potential for co-ops to fold."*

Most of the participants identified these barriers, but felt they could be worked around through knowledge and education, and having local catalysts.

Common Co-operative Solutions

Participants identified some needs that could be solved using the co-operative model. For other needs, the model was not a natural fit. Co-ops were seen as a way of dealing with needs around housing, various forms of retail, restaurants, daycares, artisan sales, catering, gardening, farm/food goods (meat, eggs or farmers' markets), and transportation. Participants had often heard of examples of these types of co-ops in other locations.

One of the ideas that piqued interest is a workers' co-operative, where the co-operative is owned by the people who work there. In that instance, each worker would need less start-up financing than an individual owner. Participants suggested that worker co-operatives might be very helpful in business succession planning, when existing owners would like to sell to retire, or in situations where a group of tradespeople could work together.

Creative Ideas

Once participants started brainstorming co-operative solutions, a number of creative applications came up for discussion. Community meeting attendees imagined a co-operative trailer court, co-operative mobile funeral service and crematorium, multi-service buildings as community hub business incubators (coffee shop, hairdresser, laundromat, and so forth), seasonal meat outlets, educational co-operatives, and co-operative cultural services.

Social Capacity

Figure 4 Word Cloud Social Capacity. CIP community meetings 2015

In addition to knowledge of the co-operative model, three additional components are required to form co-operative businesses: community need, social capacity, and business capacity. Our community events gave us a clear picture of community needs, as expressed by rural and Aboriginal community members, from across western Canada. These findings can be found in the previous chapter.

The community meetings also provided insight into each community's social and business *capacity.* As attendees discussed conventional and alternative solutions, note takers captured conversations around local strengths, barriers, and issues. We coded all of the meeting documents for what participants said about social and business capacity in their communities, and present those findings below.

Social capacity is one of the key components of problem solving as a group. We define social capacity as the ability of people in a community to work together, as well as the willingness of a community to *allow* people to work together. Social capacity extends beyond volunteerism, personal attributes, and networks to the dynamics of everyday life. The ability to work together on

a collective project is particularly necessary in the co-operative model. People not only have to come together to create a co-operative, but they also have to support the co-operative business (be its members, owners, and customers) for it to thrive.

Broad Trends

The majority of rural and Aboriginal communities we visited indicated that the social capacity of their community has diminished (somewhat or a lot) over time. While many communities identified healthy social capital, some have a hard time leveraging their strengths in a sustained and planned manner over time. During community meetings, the eighth most common word recorded was 'busy'. Service clubs are closing because they do not have adequate membership, and boards have a hard time recruiting members.

The exodus of working age people from rural areas (either by commuting, or by outright moving) means that more community work falls to senior citizens. Working age individuals in rural areas find themselves driving between communities for work, services, and to access recreation activities for themselves or their children. And what's important seems to have changed: *"Living in the community, people used to help one another. Today people don't care about one another. Money is everything."*

During times of emergency, personal crises, or for a big one- or two-day event or festivals, communities are able to come together and reach their goals collectively. Most communities identified good success with fundraising initiatives that would go for a specific cause in their town. *"When there is a tragedy, this is the best place to live because no matter who or what you are all the community will support each other — all barriers are gone. People fight when money is involved."* Community crises can bring community members closer together, and in some cases increase the sense of community. *"Sense of community is good. Improved in the last 30 years."*

Community members identified ongoing successes or failures working with different groups in their community and with groups in other communities, working with their leadership, and working with other levels of government. There is a feeling that citizens still care deeply about one another and the health of their communities. *"People can disagree within the community and there are grudges that people have amongst each other, but still at the end of the day, people here can usually agree to disagree."*

A different light shines on systemic or long-term needs, which require sustained energy to overcome. In order for a community, or several communities within a region, to work together to solve problems, social barriers need to be removed. To ease the way for leaders and volunteers to leverage community strength, community members require two supports: they must be brought together, and they must be empowered to solve a community's problems.

Identity

The way a community sees itself and the stories it tells about how it fits in the world has a powerful influence on how the community will motivate change in the future. *"I wouldn't want to live any other place. I've had the opportunity to move several times."* One of the first challenges in the

meetings was for people to identify on a map what they thought of as their community. Some individuals could readily identify what they meant by 'their' community, while others found the task much more difficult. Some identified their immediate town or rural area, while other complained that the maps we provided were not big enough, and did not include the nearby 'hub' centres where they accessed medical, shopping, or government services.

There is a general sense among people that how they define their community has changed — some feel this is a positive change, others disagree. The sense of community identity has grown outward from the individual town, or immediate service area, to a much larger geographic identity. Some communities have embraced the idea of a regional identity, seeing neighbouring communities as part of one large community that works together to offer a complementary suite of services in the area, or they see themselves as linked by sharing a similar geographic space (the same mountain valley). Discussion of development in their community automatically included thoughts about how that would impact services in another community. *"While we look at our communities as separate, we cannot survive without each other."*

Other communities have the sense that they are in a competition for services with their neighbours. They feel that not having services in their town will lead to people choosing to move to other towns in the area. Opportunities for grants, funding, or development are limited and if they are not successful and their neighbours are, it will lead to losses for their town. There is a lack of trust established between their community and other communities, and often between people within their own community. *"Regionalization has hurt this community."* In other cases, the sense of regionality, even if it is strong, causes trouble. *"When it comes time to build something new, the question becomes, where to build it?"*

A third type of community, often in northern regions but in other locations as well, feels isolated from any neighbours. They see little opportunity to work with neighbouring communities because the logistics of distance and transportation infrastructure are very challenging. These communities either have extremely stable populations, or populations with a lot of movement in and out for employment.

Of particular interest was the extent to which Aboriginal communities and their neighbouring rural communities are working together on multi-community or regional initiatives. While there are some very innovative partnerships starting in some communities, in general there is a great sense of separateness between Aboriginal and rural communities, including those that are geographically near to each other. In terms of community mapping, Aboriginal communities were more likely to identify other nearby Aboriginal communities or reserves as part of their 'community', but less likely to include nearby rural centres. The inverse was true for rural communities — any nearby reserves were generally viewed as distinct separate entities, and not part of a larger regional perspective. Interestingly, nearby rural and Aboriginal communities share many of the same challenges and are starting to recognize the need to work together. *"We need Aboriginal communities working with us."*

Many of the Aboriginal communities indicated that healing is still needed in their communities before they can begin to work together in a co-ordinated fashion and to work with other communities. There is a lack of trust, and this trust would need to be built up in a concentrated way over a period of time. *"Sometimes there are tensions within the community and between the reserve and the community — could be caused from government funding, someone always feels left out."*

People choose to live in rural or Aboriginal communities, not because they have nowhere else to go, but because choosing rural is reflective of their culture or desired lifestyle. Participants spoke of the many benefits of living in rural and Aboriginal communities: neighbourliness, sense of community, clean air, green space, family, and so forth. There was a clear sense that more people want to return to rural or Aboriginal community life but cannot, either due to lack of employment opportunity, lack of housing, or lack of access to needed services.

Seasonality has an impact on a community identity. In some communities, seasonal tourism is an important part of the local economy, but there are tensions between seasonal residents and their needs, and permanent residents and their needs. Other rural and Aboriginal communities are tied to seasonal work environments, where household members would work away at camps, mines, or doing long-haul trucking.

While seasonal work is an important driver of economic stability for these communities, it creates other problems. Communities facing seasonal populations had problems with absentee homeownership, where large parts of the population do not identify the community as their primary community. Where large numbers of residents access employment outside community, families left behind are acting as single parent families, which further limits their capacity to engage in the community. Workers feel less connected to the community when they return. *"People don't consider this 'home' like they used to anymore."*

Attitude

It might be assumed that people in rural and Aboriginal communities want exactly the same services as their urban counterparts — but this is not quite true. While the majority of people at the meetings would *like* to have the same services available, they recognize that some services are not reasonable or sustainable in their community and realize that they will have to drive, at least some of the time, to access services.

Shopping locally was a hot-button issue. Local business closures and loss of services have had a negative impact on some rural and Aboriginal communities. Individuals and communities sometimes view these changes as inevitable, and readily look to move or drive to access the services they desire. There is an attitude in some communities that it is preferable to 'shop away' to get the best deal — that local prices are higher, or that goods obtained locally are inferior.

Some rural residents combine a necessary trip with an excursion. Visiting a specialist or an eye doctor or a dentist or getting a special machine part becomes an excuse to take a trip to the city, and combine needs with diversions by adding a variety of other activities, such as visiting a movie theatre, staying in a hotel, going to a restaurant, or other entertainment. However, such activities can take away support for their local community, leading to a downward cycle with fewer and fewer viable local businesses. *"Make our community members aware they need to shop locally."*

Some communities approach these losses as challenges to overcome. They are able to come up with unique ways to solve their problems in realistic and sustainable ways. *"Pulling together to sort out/save/create services needed by the community."* They actively promote local shopping and encourage local business development that will support the needs of their community.

In areas where basic needs have been unmet or met insufficiently for long periods of time, communities have one of two possible responses. On the one hand, they have become used to accessing those services by leaving the community, and that practice becomes normalized. In other cases, the community is frustrated and apathetic. If a level of government is seen as being responsible (for example, the provincial government for health care), the attitude is often that people will wait for the government to fix it. If it is something with business potential, such as a grocery store or other retail service, many people hope that an entrepreneur will come into their community to fix the problem.

Some communities did not feel that they had the authority or power to find ways to fix service gaps in their communities, particularly in areas that have high regulation or oversight, such as health, education, or support services. Communities are afraid of making an error due to the variety of regulations and rules required by governments and legal systems. In short, they become unwilling to actively solve their own problems. *"People are less willing to find a way to make it work — always default to 'no way to make it happen.'"*

Integration

Communities, be they rural or Aboriginal, are not homogenous. Most communities can be divided into multiple groups by age, culture/religion, employment, language, even time spent living in the community. Many rural communities measure time in generations, not years. Some communities find themselves managing the needs and competing viewpoints of multiple factions. *"It's hard to get things rolling because of our (diverse) populations. Even though there will be small support there is more doubt about expanding something."*

Multiple groups function in every community. In some communities, these groups cross over and are able to work together. There is a good knowledge of what other groups in the community are doing, and they are able to work together on initiatives. *"People integrating with common age groups in activities."* In other cases, crossing over and working together was a function of space, of a place to meet. *"The old hall was always accessible — without rent. Communication would be great just to get together."* Losing that connector space meant there were fewer opportunities to meet.

In other communities, groups do not intersect. *"Not everyone knows everyone in the community."* Others observe power struggles within the community. These power struggles could be about control of what activities and for whom, or the overall social, economic, or cultural direction of the community, including cliques, oldtimers and newcomers, differences in culture or religion, or other descriptors. *"It's hard to be accepted." "You are either liked or not liked, but you know if you are liked."* In these cases, distrust causes groups to question motivations in others, and be suspicious of new initiatives. If the constraints fall into power and politics, communities can split along leadership lines. Certain groups support one set of local political leaders, while other groups support others. In such cases, there can be community competition, which pulls citizens in multiple directions.

One of the strongest dividers in rural communities was the amount of time spent in the community. Newcomers often feel that their ideas are devalued because they have not been in the community long enough to matter; their commitment to community is considered less than a multi-generational family. Newcomers spot nepotism and indicate less interest in becoming involved.

Individuals that have deep family roots in the community are often more heavily engaged in the community, but sometimes do not promote change.

A similar division was found between older people and youth. Older people felt youth were not as involved in volunteering and working in the community as they could be. Youth felt that they were not welcomed when they did make an effort. Family-based volunteering can also be a problem. *"Hard to be a part of the community when you don't have kids. You want to help in the community, but are not sure how to help or get on committees. Same people are always doing things in the community."* Some communities have started active programs to make sure the youth are involved in the community in a deeper way; others are reaching out to those without children, soliciting their involvement and volunteer support.

Aboriginal communities noted divisions among family lines within their communities. Family ties and kinship networks could be brought into play during power battles within a community, such as during elections or other contested leadership races or positions of responsibility. These kinship networks were not as visible in rural communities, but cultural kinship networks (such as Mennonite and non-Mennonite) did present a power imbalance. Although they are not always in play, such divisions, if activated, can be very strong.

Communities on the whole noted an overall decline in events that welcomed the whole community, or in local access to community gathering spots such as halls or coffee shops/bars/restaurants where people of all ages can meet, get to know each other and exchange ideas. These community gathering places have been disappearing. Many communities, in applying a business model of revenue and expenses, have found that the high cost of running them may not be sustainable on its own. However, our research clearly indicated that community members understand the critical role these connecting spaces play in the overall health and well-being of a community. *"Should take advantage of infrastructure, let people know what's available, things can be used for social events and meetings, spread the wealth around, repurpose current structures."*

Communication and Co-ordination

Although communities have a large number of groups, agencies and individuals working in them, there are large communication and co-ordination gaps, even in small communities. *"Nonprofits all struggling for dollars, zero coordination amongst them, space utilization, common secretary or keeper, even a common space where they can network and be together."* During the community engagement meetings, people that lived in neighbouring communities were able to meet each other in person for the first time, despite having worked together via e-mail over a number of years. Some administrators have connections with other administrators forged through broader networking events, but at the citizen level people do not often connect with others interested in the same issues from other communities, or even within their own community. *"There is a lack of communication between people who want to do things and people that want to get things done."*

One of the issues raised many times is that the jurisdiction boundaries for each type of service in a community can be different – a different school board, a different health region, a different economic development region, a different police region. For example, a public health nurse in health region A, may have to work with school boards A, B, and C, and economic development board A and B which makes it difficult to forge connections and help lead and build programs. *"One*

problem is that the communities don't talk to each other." Additionally, regions and boundaries are created arbitrarily, usually around 'hub' communities and these areas often do not take into account local preferences and needs. It increases the co-ordination problems and leads to greater gaps in services. "*This community cannot take action until it is possible for the small communities in the area to come together across municipal borders. The capacity of the area is limited by their ability to collaborate at this point in time."*

There is a feeling that technology is harming connectedness as people would rather interact with people using technology than meet other people in person. Paired with the diminished role of service groups, this trend contributes to people being less connected and having lower levels of trust with other groups within their community. *"Community connections are lessening with the growth of technologies."* Communication within communities, for events or to bring people together for a local meeting, faces barriers. *"Need a large community discussion, hard to get people out to these meetings."* Local newspapers are closing, and news sources are becoming more centralized and on-line. As more and more people move to on-line communication, participants indicate they feel left out of receiving information about their local community. Social media can be a powerful communication tool in some communities, but this requires both Internet access and a population willing to update and use this form of media. Short one-time events, or annual festivals get good coverage but ongoing communication about daily work and initiatives are not as well communicated, or the communication is not well co-ordinated.

Communication barriers are even stronger in Aboriginal communities. Band offices serve as a central source of information dissemination, and word of mouth remains strong. In communities where administration professionals are working at maximum capacity just doing their daily tasks, active and personally-tailored communication is not possible. Individuals in communities that are set up with town-sites may be better able to access their band office, but for communities that are set up acreage-style, with limited transportation options, individuals face communication difficulties. (The CIP project employed phone calls, email, posters, radio, newspaper ads, on-line advertisements, and asked people to spread the event through word of mouth).

Interagency groups are a powerful tool in many communities. Where these networks have been created and maintained, they are useful in providing information and co-ordinating services across a large number of groups. Capacity is an ongoing theme. All co-ordination activities require someone to take the lead. In communities that had better co-ordination, there was a point person responsible for co-ordination activities, website maintenance, social media presence, and networking.

Participants suggested that community priority or community planning documents might help. Even when these documents existed, they were not well communicated or easily available to the community. If they did exist they were often out of date and the result of a previous administration. Some communities displayed well-thought out plans and priorities, and these communities tended to have better co-ordination amongst individuals and agencies. Even so, these initiatives were often not well known among our participants, suggesting a gap between policy and uptake.

Leadership and Gatekeepers

The concept of leadership, as put forward by community meeting participants, usually referred to more than just the elected leaders of a community. Not all leaders have formalized power as part of the laws and culture in a society. Some leaders play an informal role because of deep family roots, levels of involvement, or prior roles. "*Some leadership do a good job, some don't.*"

Leadership is a critical aspect of a community's social capacity. "*They will take action as long as there is a leader or community spearpoint to get everyone going in the same direction.*" Community meeting participants readily recognized that leadership is a major component to community development, providing its direction and energy. Communities without energetic leadership showed more apathy.

At some community meetings, the local leadership was present, but quiet and respectful, using the meeting as a way to hear community concerns. At other meetings, local leadership led the discussion in some groups, which was both good and bad depending on the community or the leader. In some, however, participants were open and vocal in their disappointment: their leaders didn't show up for the meeting at all. The level of engagement at the meeting was often a good measure of a community's social capacity and leadership.

Community leaders often act as gatekeepers, and gatekeepers were evident in every community we visited. "*There was some skepticism as to whether leadership was really invested in creating change.*" Gates can be both an entrance point and a barrier; a gatekeeper decides when to open and when to close the gate on a new idea. "*New propositions would have to be presented in a way that would sell to people, but it could work.*"

Gatekeepers understand a community's cultural and political environment. When a new idea or potential project comes forward, a community must determine if it is the right project for them, or if there is a better way to address this need. In either case, if the gatekeeper(s) finds that an idea has merit and may have traction in the community, he or she will often use his or her influence to transition the idea from outside to inside the community. Or, they may be able to shut down the conversation and deprive the initiative of the legitimacy that it needs to progress. Change may also be rejected because it is disadvantageous to the gatekeeper and their circle. "*The local government prohibits competition because they are trying to protect the existing businesses who they represent or are friends with.*"

The common trait shared by all gatekeepers is that they have power in their communities, often through large networks of influence. Some are willing to share this power and influence, while others want to keep it for themselves. There may even be factions within communities, with those who support one gatekeeper and those who support another. Having one gatekeeper support an idea may mean that another will not. If there are strains between gatekeepers, new ideas may unwittingly unleash old feuds or divisions. "*It was great to have the discussion, but until you have the approval of the established families nothing happens.*"

Gatekeepers also differ in their support or resistance to ideas. A supportive gatekeeper tends to mix well with many people. Often, he or she can be very entrepreneurial and a social risk taker, curious and willing to reach out for new ideas. "*If you have a successful entrepreneurial community, you don't need leaders. Puts politicians in that fear.*" A resistant gatekeeper tends to be sceptical, conservative towards change and protective of the status quo. Change can be problematic for a community, and a resistant gatekeeper, through a desire to keep things calm, may reject change. "*Community elders have no desire to change — don't want change to happen.*"

There is a concern in some communities, both rural and Aboriginal but particularly in Aboriginal communities, that local politicians have too much power, and not enough accountability and transparency. Part of this is due to communication problems, part is from perceptions of individual citizens, and part is the nature of local politics.

Volunteers

Rural and Aboriginal western Canadian communities — in contrast to the classic perception of a high volunteer turnout — are, in fact, entering a deepening volunteer crisis. *"It is the same people always, never anyone new."* Communities are losing their volunteer base. They need people to step up, to take on community-based voluntary roles, to put time and effort into community to make it a better place to live. *"Fewer people doing the same amount of work!"* Yet, this needed increase is not happening.

Rural communities know that their main volunteer base is aging, but it appears that there is more to the story. Generational differences in how people choose to volunteer and the impact of changing economies may also be at play. *"Volunteer groups don't have the capacity they once had."* In the past, volunteering often meant serving on boards or joining service clubs with regular meetings and ongoing responsibilities. Club meetings, as well as church or other small group events, were social outings. These practices appear to be dwindling. Service clubs in particular are in decline, with many shutting down across rural western Canada.

Commuting is killing volunteerism. In some areas, people live in one town, kids go to school in another, parents work in a third, and activities occur in a fourth. Between commuting and working, there is little time left. An increase in two-parent working families has also had a major impact. In other cases, there is a family work split: one parent works away, while the other single parents the children. Volunteering then requires babysitters, and more demands on already stretched household and family time. Due to work and other conditions, people don't connect with the community they live in and so don't feel compelled to give back to it. Soliciting volunteer help is getting harder and harder. *"It is unsustainable to try and run everything on volunteers."*

Volunteering is a learned behaviour. Finding ways to grow a younger, active volunteer base is critical. Communities need succession planning, supporting the younger generation to become involved and take over — even if they do things differently. For example, today's volunteers may choose to put more energy into digital efforts, such as computer-based marketing or promotion. These volunteer activities are less visible.

In some cases, ethnic divisions or social cliques are barriers to volunteering in small communities. Increasingly, volunteers must be certified, which places an extra burden on rural and Aboriginal volunteers. There are fewer people to draw from; if that willing base is limited, or must travel to urban centres for certification, the volunteer pool shrinks again.

Today, volunteers appear to be more willing to give short-term and one-time commitments. Major fundraising events, for example, do better than week-over-week board or service club work. Others prefer to pay extra fees instead of giving volunteer time. But money only goes so far. There still needs to be people planning, steering, and executing. *"Paying more fees is not enough. Most things still need volunteers to keep things organized and running"*

The culture of volunteering is different in Aboriginal communities. Communities can galvanize volunteers for community events or crises, or to meet the needs of elders. But, few Aboriginal communities have service clubs or registered volunteer-run organizations. In addition, there is a preference for paid positions to run programming. Unlike rural centres, few to no programs or services in Aboriginal communities are carried through volunteer hours. In Aboriginal communities, volunteering is often connected to honorariums or per diems. If committees, organizations, or initiatives do not have funding in place to pay volunteers, they may struggle.

Many residents in Aboriginal communities, including grandparents, are caring for young children, which puts special pressure on volunteer time. It often doesn't make sense to arrange or pay for babysitting in order to go out and volunteer.

Leadership skills and service knowledge and expertise are lost in the community as experienced long-term volunteers retire or pass away. There are fewer people to spearhead needed activities or to access grants offered by government or corporations to assist communities or to create new services to respond to changing needs.

Political Voice

One common theme amongst the communities was that they felt left out from larger political conversations. *"Rural Canada is becoming isolated because the votes and opinions are conducted by the majority. We are too small to hear."* Participants did not feel that provincial or federal governments and policy makers understand their communities. *"Government support in rural areas is virtually non-existent now."* A common example, particularly in rural communities with aging populations, is the uneven support for aging in place. Older people worry that policies put them at a disadvantage as they age.

Participants noted an acute rural disadvantage: with small populations over large geographical areas, rural regions have limited political power compared to urban counterparts. There is a real feeling in both rural and Aboriginal communities that they have little impact on the 'outside' world, and the 'outside' world is of little help to them. *"There is an agenda to shut down small communities across Canada."* The lack of connectivity to the larger picture may translate into lost opportunities for communities to collaborate with other similar or dissimilar communities, or to offer unique services to the outside world.

Business Capacity

Figure 5 Word Cloud Business Capacity. CIP community meetings 2015

Business capital is the set of business skills and capabilities in a community. Lived experience, from education to workplace to volunteer work contributes to a community's business capital. The ability of the community to leverage these business skills and strengths to solve problems and meet community needs creates business capacity. Business capacity is thus the potential for existing businesses to thrive or new businesses to form as a result of the work by someone inside or outside the community.

During the community meetings, business capacity was not discussed directly, but it was integrated into the discussion both through identifying what businesses were not in the community (needs), and whether new or existing businesses could meet needs in the community (conventional solutions). The second half of every meeting was a facilitated discussion around solutions; both community strengths and barriers came into focus.

Other indicators of business capacity can be found in the review of the community and regional statistics, which give indicators regarding levels of education, types of businesses, self-employment data, and so forth. As is discussed elsewhere in the report, communities that have better social capacity tend to have better business capacity, although this is not true in all cases.

Broad Trends

For the most part, participants in the meetings described their communities as highly skilled, comprised of people with a variety of types of expertise. *"We have a high skilled labour force."* Most communities have local businesses, and all communities would like to see more businesses in their community. *"People in the community are skilled for business opportunities."*

Participants were realistic in terms of the sustainability problems of operating businesses in smaller communities, and were able to talk about challenges to creating thriving businesses. There is an awareness of what might work, and what might not, but there is a positive atmosphere that business development is possible when the right people are in the right place with the right supports.

Supply chains to and from rural and Aboriginal communities are long and large. Most rural communities produce large amounts of raw material to be shipped out and processed; few Aboriginal communities do so, but can be embedded in regions with high local production, such as mining or timber regions.

Community size and limited local amenities means that in most rural and Aboriginal communities, residents shop 'away', particularly if they have to travel to large urban centres to access goods or services not available locally. Such shopping patterns mean that wealth leaves the community, and does not circulate within. This problem is amplified in Aboriginal communities which usually have few privately owned businesses and face unique challenges with regulatory and legal systems.

Knowledge of Consumers

Consumer knowledge and local shopping patterns are no secret in rural or Aboriginal communities. *"The town will expand if people buy local. Need to grow local, support local, buy local."* As consumers embedded in a wider network of choices, buying local is just one option. For some communities, particularly those that are more remote, local is the primary option; in others, perhaps closer to regional hubs or urban centres, local shopping can be a struggle. In those cases, community members with greater financial resources and transportation options may choose to shop in the nearby hub or urban centre, and not use local businesses.

Residents with fewer resources and less access to transportation need those local businesses, but is their limited use enough to sustain the business? During blizzards or other natural hazard events, or at any time when community access is reduced, local business importance increases for all community members.

For these reasons, citizens know that they need to shop local to support local businesses so that they are there when needed, but consumers also look for the best deal. Local businesses cannot always compete with large box stores, chains, or other major, heavily-capitalized businesses with large clientele and lower prices. Local owners often stress excellent customer service and product, but the fight for consumer spending continues.

Community Attitude/Mindset/Skills

People in rural communities, especially those with a strong agricultural background, display an innovative mindset. *"Need to evolve into something different, make their own way. Target the market, need marketing to advertise that."* They are willing to adapt and grow with the market to ensure they are filling gaps and creating new market trends. Self-employment, and business ownership, are hallmarks of these traits.

Communities with a high level of local self-employment and business ownership may display strong business capacity. Those attuned to wage or salary earnings from gainful employment within a business may think more in terms of wanting business development to provide jobs, presenting a pool of available labour aimed at meeting labour market gaps, not necessarily in terms of starting businesses. *"Need to generate entrepreneurial mindset/skills, as opposed to a paycheque dependent mindset."*

In rural communities, participants felt confident that if someone opened a business there would be little opposition as long as it did not take away from another local business. The story in Aboriginal communities was quite different. Political support for a new business idea was crucial: Chief and council would have to support any initiatives, or it would not get off the ground. Many participants expressed direct concern about leasing and operation space on reserve or settlement land. In some cases, there was little available. In others, they spoke of past business initiatives that were derailed because of the close connection between leasing arrangements and political leadership. In those cases, the question became: what would happen if Chief and council changed? There was also a strong sense that community-level business creation is for Chief and council to determine. Business development was expressed as a political mandate.

Knowledge of Challenges

A common word to describe businesses in rural and Aboriginal communities was "closed." *"The problem here is that businesses are so inconsistent with when they choose to be open."* Participants know why businesses — and which kinds — do not work in their community. Costs of shipping items to and from their communities, being too near a major centre, having a lack of qualified staff are all concerns. The link to agriculture is still strong and many people see lots of opportunity to introduce manufacturing in their area, and ship out manufactured goods rather than just raw materials.

A second concern is business succession. Stories came out of lots of businesses, including farms, that had closed not because they were not sustainable or profitable but because there was nobody to purchase the business from the owner. Buildings and opportunities sit unused, waiting for someone to purchase them. Yet, individuals may not have the financial resources or business know-how to take them over.

In some rural and Aboriginal communities, there can be a mismatch between available positions, and having local people with appropriate training and credentials to fill those roles. *"Business owners want to be able to make money — need dependable workers."* In other cases, support roles, including finance or accounting, are what's missing. *"Nobody local to help with paperwork and book work."*

When discussing solutions and barriers to business development, participants called for information on business planning, trends and best practices. Mentorship and knowledge in running a business would also be helpful. If this kind of information and training were available, the chances of keeping businesses going or starting new businesses would increase. There are technical barriers to consider as well: many communities pointed to strong needs around infrastructure, including roads and other transportation, as well as broadband access to utilize technology. Financing has to be accessible to those wanting to start businesses.

Relationships within Community

Inter-sectoral committees, chambers of commerce, economic development agents, and other organizing bodies are critical to a community's business capacity. In communities where these groups were strong, there was a clear sense that business was connected to the community and interested in supporting overall community growth. In communities where these initiatives and bodies were absent, there was less obvious connectivity between business and the overall well being of the community.

Many rural and Aboriginal communities have large mines or other resource based industries nearby. In some cases, there is a growth opportunity for community-based businesses to serve these industries. However, there were alternative conversations. On the one hand, extraction-based industry, particularly by a large business whose shareholders and interests are in faraway urban centers, can be disconnected from the local context. *"Our communities are being raped and nothing given back."* On the other hand, some communities pondered whether they should, in fact, support large-scale extraction development. The spillover effects into a community's social health present significant risk. *"Whether or not something like a mine would be good for the community – it would provide jobs, but then concerns were raised about what an influx of money and (potentially) new people would do to the social aspect of the community."* Local rural and Aboriginal communities expressed concern that the locals neither benefit through employment nor through use of its services or commodities.

Role of Informal Business

In almost every community, the role and existence of informal businesses came up. While prevalent in rural regions, the informal economy is particularly apparent in Aboriginal communities. Either in addition to regular employment, as a way to raise steady cash, or simply to meet a local need without the overhead costs of a formal business, rural and Aboriginal residents provide car repair, transportation, hauling and moving services, hair care, babysitting, and other local goods and services.

Some of these informal arrangements could be strengthened and broadened through business development and incorporation. Their services could then be marketed and possibly accessed on a regular basis. However, many of the people providing these services are limited in what they, individually, can to do earn money. *"Hard to make a living on these types of businesses."* Their fellow residents recognize that these informal arrangements provide a critical livelihood for these people and are protective of the work they provide.

Connecting Social Capacity and Need

At the end of each community meeting, participants were asked to indicate what they believed to be the level of need and the level of the social capacity *in their community* on a scale of 1 – 10. The request caused some consternation. Participants discussed the challenge of answering these questions. They were clear that their own perception would be different from others in their community. As well, in thinking about each community need, some needs would rank higher, some lower. Asking each participant to report all needs and translate it as one number might skew the results or present a picture that would not be sufficiently nuanced. Individuals recognize that their experience of their community depends on how strongly they feel the need.

There was a similar finding for social capacity, but not quite as problematic. In some cases, it would depend on how well the respondent has overcome some of the challenges to social capacity, such as experience working with others or being included. Respondents were far more willing to articulate a number to define their perception of their community's social capacity, more so than their willingness to choose a number that represented community need.

The points in the graph below indicate the average of all the responses collected, by community. Each point is reflective of one community and combines their social capacity response with their needs. It is important to note that the range of responses in some meetings ran the spectrum from one to ten. This means that community members not only have vastly different opinions of their communities, but also that they feel others' experiences may be vastly different from their own.
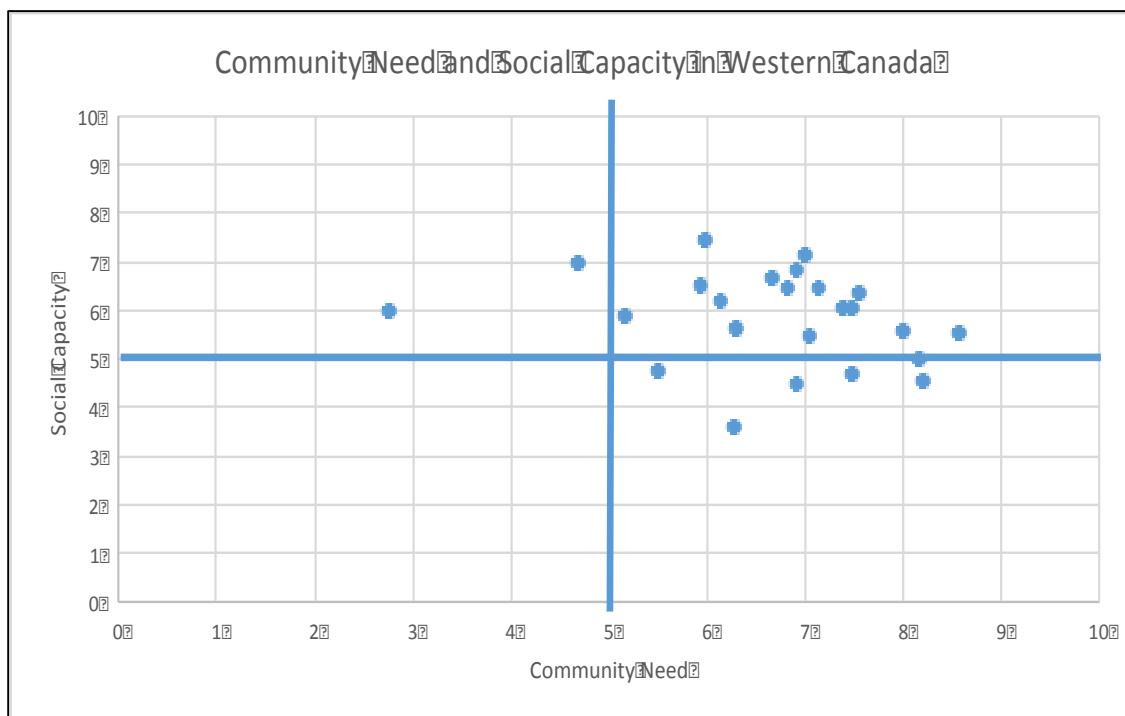

Figure 6 Community Need and Social Capacity in Western Canada

Social capacity is read vertically and has a range of 3.5 – 7.5 on the scale from one to ten. Most of the communities felt that they had mid to good social capacity. There is growth to be achieved in all communities, and the needs as discussed provide ways to improve that social capacity. The level of need is read horizontally and ranges from 2.75 to 8.5. All but one community felt they had mid to high levels of need in their community.

Participants in most of the meetings felt that their communities have lots of work to do to meet needs in their communities. They also believed that, overall, communities have the necessary capacity to work together to overcome these challenges. Communities with high levels of need and lower levels of social capacity will have added challenges in meeting their needs.

Evaluation of Community Meetings

One of the most important learnings from the community meetings came in the evaluations. At the end of each meeting, CIP asked participants to evalauate the meeting. (An overview of this evaluation is included in the earlier chapters of this final report). When we asked: "Any further comments or suggestions?" the resounding answer was: *more.*

Very good meeting, need more avenues like this to be opened, for people to have a purpose.

This has brought a lot of thinking of what possibilities can be done.

I found this fantastic and glad I came to this meeting ☺

Keep going, get as much information as you can.

A reassessment of what our community has and what it lacks.

Carry on!!

There is a great paradox of scarcity and plentitude in this area. This reality does not necessitate a null set cancelling out with no results, but must be understood as two sides of the coin whose edge we must learn to balance on, and keep on balance.

Do this again in five years to see if anything has changed.

The more meetings like this the more interest in change. And the more educated people become to feel comfortable about change.

Conclusion

The Co-operative Innovation Project hosted 26 community engagement events across rural and Aboriginal western Canada, from Manitoba to British Columbia.

During the visits, it was clear that base knowledge of the co-op model is restricted to organizational examples, such as retail co-op grocery or gas stations, or credit unions. Innovative applications of the model carries a weaker response across rural and Aboriginal communities across western Canada.

Open, community-based meetings that focused on discussing community needs drew enthusiasm. Yet, there was a clear appetite to learn more about the co-op model, to have examples and toolkit of ideas, and to connect with others who are currently using the co-op model, to see if those ideas can be shared. In some cases, our visits have led to further exploratory development. Each culture, demographic, generation, and community see something different in the co-op model.

In rural regions, the concept of 'community' is expanding, and can include several communities and rural areas. Residents are mobile and source their needs from multiple communities. Co-operatives encompassing multiple communities (which may include both rural and Aboriginal) may be a solution if policy and local political barriers allow.

Communities members must believe that they, themselves, have permission and power to initiative change, and that they can experiment with what that change might look like. In all cases, participant reviews of the community events indicated that community meetings on a similar scale are a necessary part of any kind of community change process. Our visits were valued for both their general contribution to community conversations, and our specific role in introducing the co-operative model to that conversation.

Communities display substantial differences in social capacity and business capacity, due to local social, economic, or cultural reasons. If social and business capacity are low, the challenges to start co-ops are greater. However, on average, the communities that we visited indicated both relatively high needs, combined with relatively strong social capacity.

Gatekeepers – those with formal or informal power – are present in every community. They can help or hinder co-operative development at the community level. Local leadership and advocacy is crucial to addressing local needs and developing new co-ops. Previous positive and negative experience with co-ops is also important.

Volunteerism is in flux. Working-age volunteers tend to support large events or short-term commitments over traditional board or service actcivites. Older volunteers are burning out. Aboriginal communities have few existing volunteer-based services and different expectations around volunteering, which may include pay.

The story that rang true at all community engagement meetings is that rural and Aboriginal western Canada have pride in their communities, their history and their resilience. They have realistic pictures of their futures, are not looking for handouts, but are hoping for a hand-up to examine innovative solutions to long standing and emerging problems in their communities. The co-operative model, with its flexibility and strength, may offer a useful tool for rural and Aboriginal communities across western Canada to use to build stronger communities, using their own parameters, goals, and expectations.