



Community-based innovation

Notes from the Co-operative Innovation Project — September 2015

Innovation is a process, not a result. True innovation requires development models that adapt and change as needs change. These models must be created within communities themselves.

Rural and Aboriginal communities across western Canada are frustrated. Outside businesses, organizations, and governments have attempted to create reforms, undertake development, or impose policies that just don't fit the local contexts. There is a call for legitimate change and innovation that suits people 'on the ground.'

The Co-operative Innovation Project

From 2014-2015, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan led the Co-operative Innovation Project, looking into the possibilities of co-operative development in rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada.

Through on-line and telephone surveys and open events in rural and Aboriginal communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia, the Co-operative Innovation Project asked: what are the needs in your community? And, what do you know about co-ops?

Our research indicated western Canadian rural and Aboriginal communities are all different. While there are some broad trends, differences in (e.g.) the economy, social and business capacity, demographics, size, infrastructure, communications, and culture, mean each community expressed different needs. A problem in one community is not necessarily a problem, or a problem of the same magnitude, in another. Nor will solutions that work in one community necessarily work in the next to solve similar problems. A top-down, 'one size fits all' approach to development ultimately benefits very few communities.

What is innovation?

Innovation is more than creativity. It's the process whereby new ideas are generated, tested, refined, and advanced. It's commonly assumed that innovation leads to a new end product (policy, retail widget, activity, etc.), but in fact innovation is the journey, not the destination.

Innovation is originality combined with effectiveness. It combines a new way of thinking, while at the same time asking, does it work? What can be done to make it even better? These questions lie at the heart of true innovation.

Community-based problems

In western Canada, rural and Aboriginal communities are looking for the best possible quality of life for residents. Whether that's solving company-town problems in Gillam, Manitoba, or addressing tourism and transportation needs at Masset on Haida Gw'aaii, resolving intercultural differences in Bow Island, Alberta, or creating regional-based solutions around Arborfield, Saskatchewan, western Canada's rural and Aboriginal communities face unique challenges. Each community also wants to leverage local capacities to solve those challenges.

Contrary to popular belief, few communities want provincial and federal governments to swoop in to 'solve' their problems – in fact, there is a high degree of doubt that such a thing will ever happen. Communities recognize that sometimes, an imposed 'solution' can often cause greater harm than good. Instead, rural and Aboriginal communities are looking for three things: an atmosphere where government at all levels support local innovation (instead of creating barriers); flexible financial support that can be targeted to suit local context; and direction, not dictation, on what might be possible.

History speaks

Medicare is a great example of rural innovation whose roots run deep in western Canada. It grew from rural local innovations that were supported by – or, at least, not obstructed by – the provincial government. Some municipalities hired their own doctor, using local taxes to do so. Some chose to build and operate a local hospital.

Others decided to create local health and hospital insurance schemes to support local citizens and spread costs. These small rural innovations eventually rolled up to regional, then provincial, and finally national policies. But they started as local innovations and adaptations – and each one suited the local context and community choices.

Starting with the problem

Government initiatives, even with the best of intentions, can get bogged down and stagnate over time. Often, they fall back on ‘best practice’, imposing solutions across multiple communities. While this might work from a government perspective – there is fairness, replication, cost savings, accountability, and ease of reporting built right in from the get-go – it doesn’t always work from a community’s viewpoint. Top-down practices emphasize form (what should it look like?) over function (what is it supposed to do?) and effectiveness (does it actually work?).

Instead, communities are looking for a flip. First, define the problem locally instead of implanting pre-conceived, pre-packaged ‘solutions’. This puts the focus back where it should be, on defining the problem at hand and figuring out how best to address it. Solutions are then based on fit (will it work here?) and performance (will it work well?), not compliance with outside guidelines. This approach leaves space for introducing novel local solutions.

Allowing for experimentation

The roots of today’s Medicare was local experimentation and change. What those rural communities had was the right to experiment, try different things, share stories, and make changes on the fly. Government supported the communities as they muddled through, dreamed up novel approaches and sometimes endured immense frustration. Communities today are asking for the same supportive environment that allows for and encourages local experimentation.

Learn as you go

Active learning is the key to local experimentation. Bringing in ideas from other contexts, drawing lessons from each other, sharing ideas, and learning as you go along is part of the process. Embedded step-by-step learning, trial and error, negotiation, and failure was all accepted as part

of the process. Today, communities express fear that they have to come up with the ‘right’ solution the first time. As a result, some communities take no action at all.

Share it widely

Change that is innovative and actually solves locally-defined problems is best done when many people are involved. Moving from the perspective of the community outward, instead of from government down, requires a fundamental change in philosophy. Networking across communities, across levels of government, across organizations, and across different sectors of society is critical to building meaningful, problem-driven change. Sharing spreads awareness, builds legitimacy, and offers new ideas and solutions to a broad range of potential agents.

What about co-ops?

Co-operatives, at their core, are local innovations. They start with local problems that have not been solved via other mechanisms or through other structures. Co-ops cannot be imposed from the outside – they must be created from within. It’s a model that is highly versatile and adaptable: there are co-ops in almost every sector of society, and in every kind of business – and new co-ops are always evolving. Like community-based innovation, co-ops are about on-going learning: understanding a problem, forming a solution, testing and refining it through new approaches, and changing and growing. Finally, co-op ideas and community-based innovations both grow through sharing, promoting, critiquing and challenging.

Going forward: what do communities need?

Successful government support for local innovation provides flexible financial support that can be targeted to suit local context. Good support also changes the government role from top-down dictation (do it like this) to bottom-up direction (our community needs this). Finally, supporting true community-led innovation means allowing for local ideas, experimentation, muddling through, learning, and even failure as part of the innovation process.



Centre for the Study of Co-ops
University of Saskatchewan
306-966-8502 / coop.innovation@usask.ca
coopinnovation.wordpress.com