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A Citizen-Led Program for Rural Community Economic Development: Two Case Studies

Catherine Ipsen, Tom Seekins, Nancy Arnold, and Karl Kraync

The Citizen-Led Economic Development Project facilitates a leadership role in rural economic development for people with disabilities and agencies that serve them. If people with disabilities and human service agencies are involved in economic development activities, it is anticipated that local decision-making will better address their interests. Using Project guidelines, people with disabilities lead a community economic assessment using "import substitution" and "value-added" economic development strategies. Human service agencies use recommendations from the community assessment to build linkages with local economic development leaders and stakeholders. This paper describes the first two implementations of the Citizen Led Economic Development Project in Eastern Utah and Northeastern Vermont.

Keywords: community development, disability, rural

Rural economic development has rarely represented the interests of people with disabilities, nor have people with disabilities typically been involved in development activities. This disregard is problematic because people with disabilities have a vested interest in economic growth and outcomes. Their rate of employment is 49% lower than that of people without disabilities (National Organization on Disability, 2001), and they have limited job opportunities in their rural communities (Arnold, Seekins, & Nelson, 1997). If people with disabilities and the agencies that serve them want to enhance local employment opportunities, they must take an active role in developing and implementing the agenda of rural economic development.

This paper reports on two implementations of the Citizen-Led Economic Development Project, which uses a "self-development" framework to engage people with disabilities and service agencies in economic development activities. The project is designed to create a short-term role for people with disabilities and service agencies that allows for enhanced

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community understanding of the goals and resources that this constituency brings to the economic development table.

Rural Self-Development Strategies

Self-development strategies encourage broad based community “buy-in” to develop home-grown businesses supported with local resources (Sharp & Flora, 1999; Sharp, Agnitsch, Ryan, & Flora, 2002). Unlike industrial recruitment, self-development strategies rely on broad representation from citizen groups and community constituencies such as farmers, retirees, and business organizations (Sharp & Flora, 1999).

Critics say self-development is a more cumbersome approach to development because it is difficult to generate sufficient representation; multiple stakeholder interests result in disjointed agenda setting (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003); and development strategies are biased “towards service or specialty firms that may not be viable if the local trade area is too sparsely populated” (Sharp et al., 2002, p. 406).

Community development researchers have shown, however, that rural communities with broad, diverse leadership and participation tend to have more successful outcomes than communities with a narrower constituency (Reed & Paulsen, 1990; Wall & Luther, 1989; Wall & Luther, 1992; Sharp & Flora, 1999; Perkins, Hughey, & Speer, 2002). Self-development under diversified leadership has many strengths. First, a wide constituency ensures that development projects consider the unique needs of represented groups, such as individuals with disabilities, minorities, retirees, local associations, small business owners, farmers, or individuals who value local amenities (such as proximity to outdoor recreation). When community development involves a wide spectrum of community stakeholders, it’s likely to address the needs of the whole community. Incorporating community concerns into the initial decision-making process may minimize opposition to future development efforts (Sharp & Flora, 1999; Schafft & Greenwood, 2003).

Diversified leadership enhances opportunities to secure local funding streams that might be combined to support economic-development projects such as downtown revitalization, business incubators, and business retention or expansion programs (Sharp & Flora, 1999). Local endeavors that align with the desires of the broader community have a stronger chance of success. Studies show that home-grown businesses (rather than businesses that have relocated to the community) are more likely to hire community members (Sharp & Flora, 1999) and remain in the community over time (Deweese, Lobao, & Swanson, 2003), contributing to the economic stability of development efforts.

Of particular relevance to people with disabilities, self-development imparts “solidarity” and “agency” within the community. Bhattacharyya (2004, p.11-12) defines solidarity as a “shared interest or circumstance” and agency as “the capacity of people to order their world, the capacity to create, reproduce, change, and live according to their own meaning systems, and to have the powers to define themselves as opposed to being defined by others.” Solidarity and agency are particularly important for groups that have been distanced from the decision-making process. For instance, a study conducted by the National Organization on Disability found that only 41% of voting-aged individuals with disabilities voted in the 2000 presidential election (NOD, 2004). Self-development strategies give these disengaged social groups a voice as they become “agents” in the development process. Self-development strategies are a platform for participation, in which participants’ values or interests drive the outcomes (Reese & Fasenfest, 1997; Knaap & Simon, 1994).

People with Disabilities as Economic Development Leaders

Many small communities lack the organizational resources and skills to pursue basic economic assessment and planning projects (Knaap & Simon, 1994; Wall & Luther, 1989).

People with disabilities, vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs, and rural Centers for Independent Living (CILs) are an untapped resource for community development projects (Seekins, 1994a; Seekins, 1994b).

The Citizen-Led Economic Development Project builds a role for people with disabilities by promoting participation in, and ownership of, economic development activities. It facilitates an opportunity for agencies that serve people with disabilities an insider perspective on business and community development activities.

People with disabilities benefit from direct involvement in community development activities that increase their likelihood of achieving personal goals such as community integration, employment, or small-business ownership. Likewise, service agency participants build community capacity to serve their clients with disabilities better. The state Vocational Rehabilitation system is charged with assisting individuals with disabilities to secure meaningful employment and CILs provide a range of advocacy services that include employment of individuals with disabilities. Both VR and CIL programs can benefit from enhanced community exposure and leadership to facilitate employment for their clients/consumers.

Perhaps the most significant benefit, however, relates to community outcomes. Direct impacts include the community assessment and follow-up activities. Less obvious outcomes relate to changing community perspectives about disability. Through participation in the Project, individuals with disabilities come to be recognized as an asset to the community by taking a lead where others have not. In doing so, these direct and indirect benefits accrue to the community.

To date, the Project has been implemented in two rural communities, one in eastern Utah and one in northeastern Vermont. With Project guidance, people with disabilities conducted an economic assessment process that leads to community discussions and actions to facilitate economic growth. Researchers hypothesized that community development participation would have positive economic and social impacts on each community, would lead to meaningful community roles for disability service agencies, and would integrate people with disabilities into the community.

GENERAL METHODS

This section describes the overall Project, followed by specific descriptions of the two implementations in eastern Utah and northeastern Vermont. Researchers from the Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities (RTC:Rural) began the Project by (1) creating a guidebook for people with disabilities to lead a community assessment using self-development economic strategies, and (2) developing a process to strengthen Vocational Rehabilitation's (or another human service agency's) participation in local economic development activities. The guidebook and process directed implementation of the Citizen Led Community Development Project in small rural communities. Typically, the Project takes six months to complete, followed by additional economic development activities identified through the community assessment process.

Community Requirements

Researchers were particularly interested in rural communities that were distant from an urban center. To participate, a community (1) must have a central community population of 500 to 5,000 people and a county population of 30,000 or fewer, (2) could not suffer from a recent economic crisis, (3) could not have completed any comparable economic development process in the preceding three years, (4) must function independently of a metropolitan area, (5) needed a sufficient pool of potential leaders with disabilities, (6) must have minimal economic development infrastructure, and (7) must be actively served by a CIL or VR program interested in sponsoring the Project.

Participants

The Project required (1) a sponsoring disability service agency, (2) a co-sponsoring economic or business development agency, (3) at least two individuals with disabilities to serve as team leaders of the community assessment process, and (4) several study team members to assist with community assessment activities. The Project core team comprised the sponsoring and co-sponsoring agencies, the team leaders, and the study team members. In addition, a community advisory committee of local economic development stakeholders provided overall guidance, helped evaluate and disseminate Project findings, and publicly supported the Project and associated activities.

As conceived, the Project's sponsoring agency would be a regional/local VR program or a regional/local CIL. The state/federal vocational rehabilitation system (VR) currently offers an array of services including assessment, counseling, referral, physical and mental restoration, training, maintenance, and post-employment services to assist people with disabilities find and maintain employment (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; 34 CFR). Section 103(a) of the Rehabilitation Act defines allowable VR services as "any service described in an individualized plan for employment necessary to assist an individual with a disability in preparing for, securing, retaining, or regaining an employment outcome that is consistent with the strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests and informed choice of the individual." Although VR is not typically in the business of community development, their mission statement clearly promotes the development of employment opportunities for their clients, both in terms of paid employment and self-employment.

Centers for Independent Living (CILs) are private, non-profit corporations, created to provide four core services for people with disabilities including advocacy, independent living skills, information and referral, and peer counseling. CILs do not offer direct employment services, but provide advocacy to "assure physical and programmatic access" to employment (Independent Living USA, 2006). One way to fulfill "programmatic access" is to offer people with disabilities opportunities to shape discussions to consider their interests within the community.

The sponsoring agency (VR or CIL) is responsible for recruiting a local economic development stakeholder to co-sponsor the project. In addition, the sponsoring agency (VR or CIL) identifies and recruits potential team leaders from their active client base. Team leaders or the sponsoring agency identifies and recruits additional team members from the broader community.

The Guidebook

The *Guidebook for Citizen Involvement to Create and Expand Businesses in Rural Communities*¹ provides the framework and describes the procedures for implementing the Citizen Led Community Development Project. Researchers worked with a practicing economic development specialist² to develop the Guidebook based on import substitution and value-added business development strategies. Briefly, import substitution is a strategy to replace community imports with locally produced products, which can effectively keep community dollars circulating in the local economy. Value-added business development occurs when raw or intermediary products are taken further along in the production process or when by-products from existing businesses are used for secondary business ventures.

The Guidebook provides step-by-step procedures for nine phases to initiate, conduct, and complete a local community assessment and planning process (Seekins, Arnold, & Ipsen, 2004)³. Table 1 lists the phases and primary objective for each phase. The Guidebook covers

Table 1. Nine Phases of the Citizen Led Community Assessment

Phase	Title	Primary Objective
I	Organizing the Community Study	Core team plans the project and defines the study area.
II	Assessing the Study Area	Team leaders and study team members collect and analyze information about the area's community and economic development influences.
III	Community Leader and Business Support Service Interviews	Team leaders and study team members interview area leaders and a representative from a business support service about issues and opportunities in the study area.
IV	Public Awareness and Community Advisory Committee Update	Using Phase I to III findings, team leaders either present a preliminary report at a public meeting or disseminate an informational letter to constituents.
V	Business Interviews and Surveys	Team leaders and study team members interview businesses about goods and services currently purchased from outside the area that could be purchased locally. Business interviews also explore barriers to business creation and expansion.
VI	Developing Feasible Business Ideas	Team leaders and study team members synthesize Phase III to Phase V information and list "most viable," "potential," or "challenging" business ideas and community actions.
VII	A Working Meeting to Develop a Comprehensive Action Plan	Team leaders and study team members meet with community economic development constituents and community advisory committee members to evaluate Phase VI recommendations and outline a rough action plan.
VIII	Final Public Meeting	Core team members present findings at a public meeting and solicit comments and recommendations on the plan.
IX	Preparing and Disseminating a Final Report	Core team members write the final report and action plan and send to key agencies, local libraries, and media outlets.

each phase in a separate chapter. Each chapter includes (1) a description of the primary objective, (2) expected products, (3) a step-by-step description of that phase's activities, and (4) forms to be completed for specific activities or analyses. The procedures and forms build sequentially to a final report describing the community's economic status including its strengths and weaknesses, potential business creation and expansion opportunities, and recommendations for community action.

Procedures

The sponsoring agencies and researchers first establish a flexible Project timeline for community assessment activities. The sponsoring agency recruits a convenience sample of two team leaders with disabilities who are paid a small stipend to cover travel, communications, and other Project expenses. Although recruitment procedures were not specified, both VR agencies recruited team leaders from their active client base. Recruitment of additional study team members (with or without disabilities) was conducted by the team

leaders or the sponsoring agency. Team leaders and study team members were identified and recruited based on their ability to fulfill the requirements of the community assessment process, which included skills in reading comprehension, computer use, letter and report writing, meeting facilitation, and interviewing.

The researchers orient the team leaders to the Project and use of the Guidebook. In turn, team leaders train study team members to help conduct the community assessment procedures outlined in the leader's Guidebook. Throughout the process, team leaders and study team members work with the sponsoring and co-sponsoring agency and community advisory committee to substantiate findings and to disseminate results.

The intervention depends on the collaborative relationship between the sponsoring agency and a co-sponsoring agency. The co-sponsor can take many forms (e.g., a Small Business Development Center, a community economic development corporation, or a high-profile community business leader) so long as they have an established role in the community's economic development efforts. Initially, the economic development co-sponsor informs the sponsoring agency of any past economic development efforts, introduces the sponsor to the existing players, and provides direction on how to become engaged in economic development activities.

Later, this collaboration fosters buy-in from the community. Endorsement from a co-sponsoring agency is important in gaining access to key community leaders and other business people. The co-sponsoring agency also helps identify key economic stakeholders to include in the evaluation and dissemination of community assessment Project findings.

In the final stages of the Project, the collaboration between the sponsor and co-sponsoring agency helps transform Project findings into longer-term economic development outcomes. The co-sponsoring agency helps disseminate results to key community stakeholders, and keep the community assessment recommendations alive in future economic development discussions and activities. Community partners become change agents who implement study recommendations by organizing business creation and investment activities. This progression from recommendation to action is the cornerstone of long-term economic change.

RESULTS

Case Study 1: Eastern Utah

Setting

In 1999, Emery County in east-central Utah was chosen as the first implementation site. Emery County has nine principal towns with Castle Dale serving as the county seat. In 1999, the county population was 10,862 (SEUALG, 2002), the unemployment rate was 7.4%, and the workforce was 3,906 (Utah Department of Workforce Services, 2004). Primary industries in the area were coal mining, power generation, and power transmission. Emery County's Economic Development Office works with government and private partners in the area. The regional office of the Utah Vocational Rehabilitation program is located in Price, some 30 miles to the north.

Participants

The district director of the regional VR office sponsored the Project and recruited the director of the Emery County Economic Development Office to co-sponsor the Project. The VR district director also recruited two VR clients to serve as team leaders of the Project's community assessment phase. Utah Team Leader #1 (Utah - TL1) was a 24-year-old married woman with a mental health disability. Utah Team Leader #2 (Utah - TL2) was a 60-year-old married woman with a stroke-related disability. These two team

leaders recruited a convenience sample of four study team members to assist with Project activities. None of the study team members reported having a disability.

Community Assessment Procedures

The Emery County community assessment process began in the summer of 1999 and took four months to complete. After identifying the study area of Emery County, the core team reviewed county business licenses and identified over 300 locally owned and operated business. Of these, 118 business owners were identified as potential interviewees for the community assessment process (see Table 1). Identified businesses were representative of the county's business demographic. Of the 118 business owners contacted, 59 agreed to be interviewed, representing a 50% response rate.

Business owners were asked (1) to identify products and services currently purchased outside the community for which local products and services might be substituted; (2) to identify ideas for potential value-added businesses that would use locally produced raw or intermediary materials; and (3) to discuss existing community strengths and barriers. In December, 1999, a review committee including team leaders, two representatives from the sponsoring agency, a co-sponsor representative, a local banker, and the lead researcher reviewed the interview responses, identified viable business expansion and creation opportunities, and organized recommendations.

Community Assessment Outcomes

Emery County's strengths include a unique American Indian and pioneer heritage, open spaces for farming and ranching, a small-town lifestyle, beautiful mountains and deserts, and a rich economic base of natural resources and related extraction businesses. Emery County's barriers centered on its isolation from potential markets and concerns over shipping and transportation costs. Other barriers included a shrinking economic base because of mine closures in the area and ongoing conflict between environmentalists and economic developers. Business owners were concerned about economic development attitudes that relied too much on the coal and power industries to provide local jobs, competition among area communities to attract new businesses, resistance towards community change, and a general hopelessness or apathy regarding business development efforts.

The community strengths and barriers provided a backdrop for 32 business development or expansion ideas that were generated from the business owner interviews and review committee suggestions and brainstorming. Business ideas were grouped by the review committee as "most viable," "potential," or "challenging." The "most viable" business ideas were aligned with identified community strengths, and included a gypsum mill, a chemical sales route business, and mine-support services that fit with the area's natural resources and extraction strengths. "Challenging" businesses were perceived as unable to attract sufficient local or regional demand for long-term success.

The Emery County final report⁴ summarized community strengths and barriers to economic development, opportunities for business expansion or creation identified in business owner interviews, and made recommendations to the community. The team leaders and co-sponsors presented the results to the Council of Governments (i.e., all city councils in the county), the County Commission, the Chamber of Commerce, the Economic Development Council, business interviewees, and the general public.

Participant Outcomes

Utah team leaders worked collaboratively but led different Project activities. Utah-TL2 was more active in the community organization and outreach process, while Utah-TL1 did more documentation and follow-up activities.

Throughout the Project, Utah team leaders each maintained a “civic engagement diary.” During four one-week intervals, each leader described the civic activities that they participated in during that week. Leaders indicated the type of event, their roles in the event, and their overall satisfaction with the event on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = very dissatisfied to 4 = very satisfied. Most civic events described by Utah-TL1 focused on Project-related activities. Utah-TL2 had a broader range of civic engagements, including significant responsibilities at the county fair. Utah team leaders reported that they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their participation in civic activities 96% of the time.

Utah team leaders rated their satisfaction with different elements of community participation, including involvement in community organizations, their influence on community decision-making, their contributions to the community, and their sense of community belonging. Both team leaders felt most satisfied with their involvement, influence, contribution, and belonging during the Project’s most intensive business interview phase. Sense of belonging continued beyond the Project’s community assessment phase.

In addition to satisfaction with Project activities, team leaders reported personal outcomes. Utah-TL1 finished her college degree and was hired by the sponsoring agency as a vocational rehabilitation counselor. Utah-TL2 was hired as a “consultant” to help another community conduct a similar economic development project. Utah-TL2 is still a community activist in Emery County and credits this community participation to contacts she made during the Citizen Led Economic Development Project.

Economic Development Outcomes

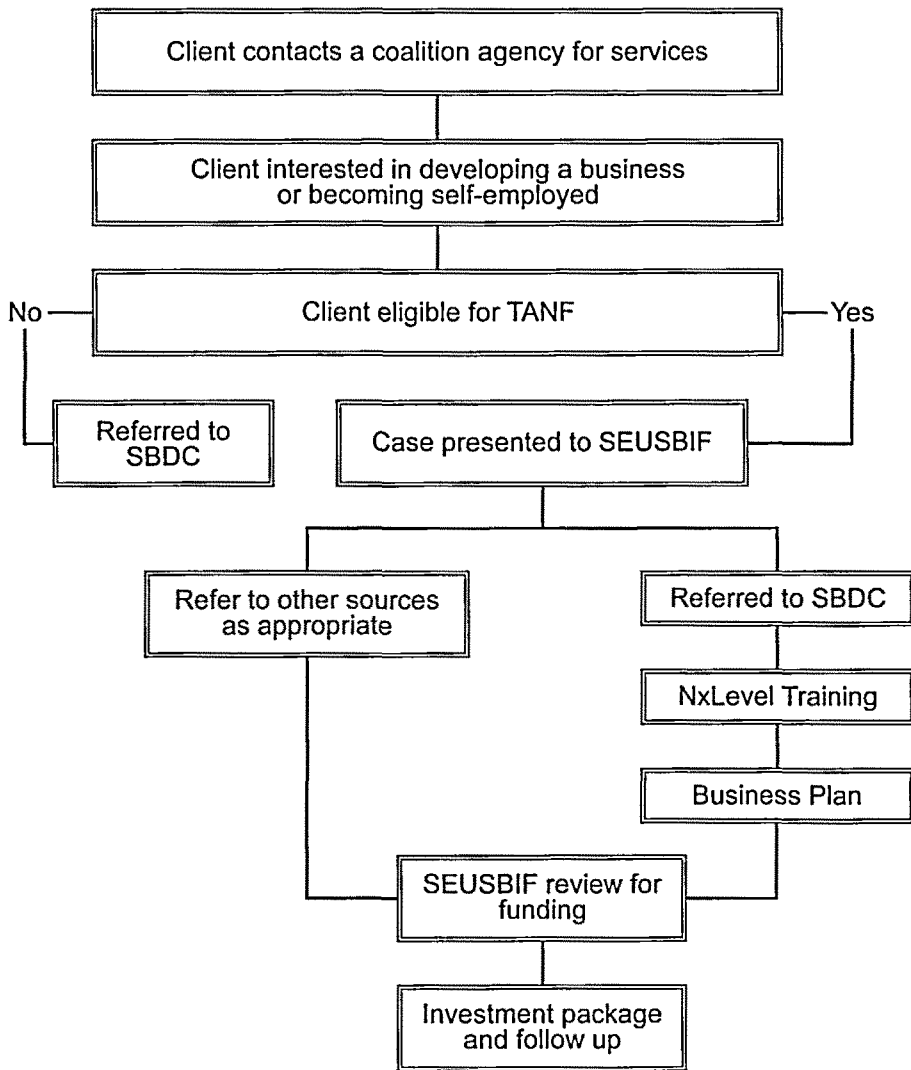
After the community assessment process, the community advisory committee expanded to include the local Small Business Development Center, the Department of Workforce Services for the area, and representatives from other counties. This coalition became an economic development force for Emery County and surrounding communities.

In 2000, the coalition applied for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds to promote employment and business development by TANF recipients. The VR director (the sponsoring agency) and the director of Emery County Economic Development (the co-sponsoring agency) spearheaded the development of the proposal for a program named the South Eastern Utah Small Business Investment Fund (SEUSBIF). SEUSBIF received \$865,000 to administer the grant and provide agency grants to build new businesses. To oversee SEUSBIF activities, the coalition recruited additional members from public utilities, two local colleges, the Department of Work Force Services, the Carbon County Economic Development Office, and private businesses.

SEUSBIF was designed to facilitate the establishment of small businesses for eligible low-income individuals. Figure 1 outlines SEUSBIF’s plan of operations. A client who was eligible for TANF⁵ and interested in starting a business could enter the program through any of the coalition agencies. Eligible individuals were referred to the local Small Business Development Center (SBDC) for entrepreneurship training (NxLevel) and assistance in preparing a business plan. Once NxLevel training was completed, the individual submitted a business plan to SEUSBIF’s Grants Committee for funding approval. If the business appeared feasible, SEUSBIF allocated funds to support business start-up and follow-along services.

Between 2000 and 2003, SEUSBIF funds were used to develop 79 new businesses that created 192 jobs. An initial investment of \$694,020 from agency grants leveraged an additional \$1,923,634 from personal investments and other loans. As of early 2005, 66 of these businesses were still operating. The 66 businesses still in operation reported a total of \$3,216,662 in revenue during a seven-month period in 2004-2005. Entrepreneurs with disabilities started 11 of these small businesses, which were jointly-funded ventures between SEUSBIF and VR.

Figure 1. SEUSBIF Operations Model



SEUSBIF funding is no longer available, but the Emery County coalition continues to operate. During the 2005 state legislative session, a state representative and a state senator introduced interim study legislation to research long-term funding for SEUSBIF business development activities. In June 2006, the Office of the Legislative Auditor General released an independent analysis to the legislature about the SEUSBIF program. The report concluded: "SEUSBIF has provided some economic benefits to the rural communities they served, through increased business spending for materials and supplies in the local economies and through an increase in the number of jobs. To date, it appears that the economic benefits provided to these rural communities as a result of SEUSBIF exceeded the program costs." (Office of Utah Legislative Auditor General, 2006, p. 2). The coalition has collaborated with economic development groups in Wasatch, Duchesne, and Daggett Counties to pursue economic development opportunities and strengthen legislative lobbying efforts.

Case Study 2: Northeastern Vermont

Setting

In 2003, the second implementation of the Citizen Led Economic Development Project took place in north-central Vermont. Orleans County's estimated population was 27,103 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) with Newport (population 5,092) serving as the county seat. The county included 20 towns or communities and had an unemployment rate of 7.6% in 2003 (Economic Research Service, 2004). Major industries included manufacturing, timber extraction, and tourism. The regional VR office serving Orleans County is located in Newport. Economic development infrastructure in Orleans County was, and continues to be, extremely limited.

Participants

The district administrator of the Newport regional VR office hired a local business leader to coordinate the Project in Orleans County. The local business leader was well connected with local business development efforts and fulfilled the role of the business development agency. Together, the VR district administrator and project coordinator served as co-sponsors for the Project.

The VR district administrator recruited two team leaders. Vermont Team Leader #1 (Vermont-TL1) was a 43-year-old man with an injury related disability. Vermont Team Leader #2 (Vermont-TL2) was a 33-year-old woman with a post-traumatic stress disorder. The district administrator recruited eight study team members to attend the initial community assessment training. Of these eight, only two study team members participated throughout the Project. Non-participants indicated that the Project took too much time or did not fit with their personal goals.

Community Assessment Procedures

The study team first defined the study area to include all 20 small communities in Orleans County. Next, team leaders and study team members interviewed 11 community leaders to gain a general sense of business development, infrastructure, and economic conditions in Orleans County. The core team identified 135 locally owned and operated businesses for potential interviews, and 56 business owners representing all 20 communities completed interviews. The remaining 79 business owners declined to participate or were unavailable. Team leaders and study team members found business owners resistant to inquiries concerning their business operations or business development ideas.

In February, 2004, the Project's core team met with two members of the research team to analyze community leader and business interview responses and prepare a preliminary report for the community advisory committee.

The community advisory committee included representatives of a local micro-loan program and the Small Business Development Center, the president of a local ski resort, and a local business owner. The community advisory committee provided input and rated the feasibility of business ideas generated by the business interviews. These discussions and recommendations were integrated into a community report.

Community Assessment Outcomes

Vermont's final report⁶ focused on area strengths; barriers to development; "most viable," "potential," and "challenging" business ideas; and recommendations for community action. Area strengths included Orleans County's natural beauty; its varied recreation and organized sports activities; its growing tourism industry; its artist community; the entrepreneurial spirit of local residents; and local banks' willingness to partner in small business development activities.

Reported barriers to economic development included a labor pool with poor math and “people” skills; inadequate information about business support programs, services, and funding; poor roads and few transportation options between local communities, resulting in too few customers for local businesses; a shrinking manufacturing sector; and high utility costs coupled with poor access to telecommunications services.

The “most viable” potential businesses were linked with community strengths. For example, a craft cooperative, a Vermont products gift basket business, cleaning and maid services, hotel and motel management support, and bike/boat/snowmobile rental operations all fit with the budding tourist industry in the area.

The community advisory committee recommended taking several action steps focused on achievable community goals.

1. Develop a community calendar to coordinate local tourism marketing campaigns.
2. Expand public education about local business development and support services.
3. Organize a “one-stop” process for business development and support services.
4. Develop a mechanism to coordinate and promote local tourist events for tourism.
5. Offer adult work-readiness education that emphasizes basic math and customer service skills.

Participant Outcomes

Orleans County team leaders and study team members provided baseline and follow-up interview data related to participation in the Project. Initially, the team leaders and study team members (n = 4) were interested in participating for several reasons. First, they wanted to make community contacts who could help them find jobs or identify possible self-employment ventures (n = 4). Participation in the Project was a way to “fill up free time” or “get out of the house” and to meaningfully participate in the community (n = 3). Both team leaders said that “local skepticism” of business people or community “alienation” made it difficult for people with disabilities to get jobs in the area. They felt that participation in the Project might help dissolve some of these stereotypes.

Orleans County team leaders were very active throughout the community assessment process. They conducted weekly meetings with the study team and met leader-to-leader at least once a week to assess progress on Project activities. Team leaders assumed different roles related to Project activities (similar to Emery County team leaders). Vermont-TL1 was a former business owner who was comfortable conducting interviews and interacting with community leaders. Vermont-TL2 managed daily activities such as sending interview request letters to business owners, and apprising community stakeholders of Project meetings, outcomes, and next steps.

Overall, participation in the Project was positive for team leaders and study team members. At the conclusion of the community assessment process, Vermont-TL1 wanted to continue his involvement in community development efforts. Although he expressed some disappointment about the pace of follow-up activities and the effort required to get everyone on board, he felt more connected to the community. He observed, “After the Project, I have been watching the [news]papers and seeing things like what the Workforce Development Committee is doing ... slow but sure, there are things happening.”

Vermont-TL2 also felt more connected to the community at the conclusion of the process. Getting to know the community was gratifying to her. Vermont-TL2 got a “decent job” because of her participation. She remarked, “This is a place where you really have to be known to get a decent job. So, this [Project] gave me an opportunity to put my name out there and show what I am actually capable of doing. So it really helped me in that sense.”

Despite Vermont-TL2’s positive outcomes, she experienced some conflict about the

Project. Although she felt strongly that her leadership role as a person with a disability could help change community perceptions, she resented being identified as a client of VR services. At the beginning of the process Vermont-TL2 stated: "Through this Project, I hope to open peoples' minds about what VR is really about . . . Hopefully, people in this community will learn to be more open to people with disabilities." However, at the Project's conclusion she said that she disliked "being earmarked as a person with a disability" and felt self-conscious during the final community meetings.

One study team member said that the community assessment process helped her identify a potential self-employment venture, and that her new community connections would help her start a business. The other study team member enjoyed being part of the process, but was uncomfortable conducting the interviews. She viewed participation in the Project as a test of her readiness to re-enter the workforce. At the conclusion of the Project, she was "disappointed in herself" because she enjoyed the group process but was uncomfortable participating in many of the community assessment activities.

Economic Development Outcomes

At the conclusion of the community assessment process in Orleans County, RTC: Rural researchers and the Emery County Project sponsor/SEUSBIF developer conducted a series of workshops in Vermont about the SEUSBIF program. This led Vermont VR to provide \$10,000 in seed money for a visit to Emery County, Utah to (1) learn more about SEUSBIF operations and (2) prepare an action plan describing how the SEUSBIF model could be implemented in Vermont. A VR counselor and a representative from the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (VSJF) traveled to Emery County in October 2004 to visit the SEUSBIF board of directors, and prepare an action plan for the growing community advisory committee in Orleans County.

Based on action plan recommendations, a coalition of four agencies pooled funds and hired a grant writer. The coalition included the Orleans County VR Office, the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (a grant-funded agency for small business development), the University of Vermont Extension Service (which supports small business creation), and North Eastern Kingdom Community Action (a three-county service provider for low-income constituents). The grant writer prepared a SEUSBIF type proposal for USDA Community Development Block Grant funding, based on the region's Rural Enterprise Action Plan (REAP) designation. REAP designation allows for the development of a comprehensive community development plan in exchange for "special access to Rural Development and other federal funding opportunities" (Northeast Kingdom Collaborative, 2000). Although this USDA grant was not funded, the coalition continues to support a grant writer to secure funding for development activities.

DISCUSSION

Researchers were interested in Project impacts for three groups: people with disabilities, service agencies (such as VR or ILCs), and the community as a whole. It was anticipated that participants with disabilities would experience personal outcomes related to community connections and meaningful participation. Disability service agencies were expected to become more integrated into local economic development activities and support the interests of people with disabilities in community discussions and actions. Communities were expected to benefit from additional economic development activities, in addition to recognizing the positive role that people with disabilities play in the community. While the Utah and Vermont case studies are not definitive, many of these expectations were realized.

People with Disabilities

Six people with disabilities participated in the Project, including two team leaders from Utah, two team leaders from Vermont, and two study team members from Vermont. One of the striking similarities across sites and individuals was the sense of community connectedness or solidarity that participants gained through participation in the Project. Two participants got jobs through these community connections, and two others remain active in other civic activities.

A National Organization of Disability (NOD) study (2002) found that people with severe disabilities cite lack of encouragement from community organizations as the primary reason they do not participate more actively in their communities. This finding is in contrast to people without disabilities (and employed people with disabilities) who cite time constraints as the major barrier to community participation. Community participation can be particularly important for unemployed people with disabilities because it provides a sense of well-being. Data from the National Health Interview Survey show that “at every level of mobility limitation, from none through moderate, to most severe, persons who participated more in the community were more likely to be very satisfied with their lives” (National Organization on Disability, 2003).

The Citizen-Led Community Economic Development Project encouraged participation by people with disabilities. Through creation of a meaningful role, people with disabilities became agents in the community. This may be a step to fostering community participation for disenfranchised groups. Schafft and Greenwood’s action research study concluded that incorporating groups that historically have not been active in the community such as the “really dispossessed, including lower income community members . . . and others more isolated from the social mainstream.” requires additional effort (2003, p.27).

Most study participants did not object to being identified as individuals with a disability, and reported the importance of being recognized as valuable community members. However, as exemplified by Vermont-TL2, this was not always the case. While many team members hoped to overcome negative stereotypes, some feared being identified as individuals with a disability, particularly in terms of future employment opportunities. This conflict deserves additional attention in future replications of the Project. At a minimum, team leaders should know that revealing their affiliation with VR or CILs may let the community know they have a disability.

In addition, some participants were discouraged by their less defined roles once the community assessment process was completed. Vermont-TL1 best described this frustration.

Since the main meeting, I have been in touch with VR a couple of times . . . and they told me no problem, that I can be on the committee. I wanted to follow-up on it [*Project recommendations*]. I didn’t want to see all this work get done to sit on the shelf and gather dust It seems to be an awful slow drawn-out process to get the committee they want going. And, to me, I would be ready to go now It seems kind of slow to me at this point in time It just seems like so long. I guess I haven’t really been much involved in government stuff.

Despite this frustration, both Vermont team leaders have stayed involved in economic development discussions, and they plan to serve on advisory boards of future grant funded projects. Similarly, Utah team leaders reported an enhanced sense of belonging that went well beyond active participation in the Economic Development Project.

Service Agencies

Broad-based linkages with businesses, business developers, and other agencies provide opportunities for identifying unmet needs, strengths, overlaps, and gaps in how agencies serve the community. Cooperation, rather than competition, gets everyone a piece of the resource “pie.”

Cooperation allows human service agencies to contribute to the business community rather than being identified only as seeking assistance. Human service agencies have the opportunity and ability to become an integral part of community development while representing the interests of people with disabilities in economic development activities and discussions.

In both rural Vermont and Utah, the local/regional VR office was the sponsoring agency for the Project and subsequently maintained an active role in community economic development efforts. In Emery County, VR had a history of participation in economic development activities, but it took the creation of SEUSBIF to formalize the interests of people with disabilities into economic development activities. SEUSBIF's coordinated efforts and co-mingling of resources from economic development stakeholders resulted in business development opportunities for people with and without disabilities.

Before the Project in Orleans County, community development stakeholders did not understand why VR was interested in community development efforts. This Project provided VR with the opportunity to describe how VR clients resemble other individuals who face socio-economic barriers to employment. Community partners came to recognize how VR's mission was similar to other community economic development players, including North Eastern Community Action, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, and the University of Vermont Extension Service. Through this connection, VR shaped economic development discussions to include the interests of people with disabilities and led the community towards a SEUSBIF type of model. The coalition developed through Project activities in Vermont, continues to operate and pursue economic development funding opportunities.

Community Outcomes

A major accomplishment of the Citizen-Led Community Development Project was greater acceptance of alternative economic development strategies. Emery County had been over-reliant on the coal and power industries, and it competed with local communities to attract new business. These barriers are typical under industrial recruitment strategies, which depend on recruiting external businesses to solve economic growth issues (Sharp et al., 2002). Since the Project and the creation of SEUSBIF and the coalition, more emphasis has been on internal growth of small entrepreneurial ventures. This grassroots business development is expected to provide more long-term economic stability (Deweese et al., 2003; Sharp & Flora, 1999; Sharp et al., 2002), and to foster collaborative regional development (Deweese et al., 2003). Rather than competing to attract large industrial employers, small communities collaborate to promote and support home-grown businesses (Deweese et al., 2003; Sharp et al., 2002). The development of inter-regional collaborations between Emery, Wasatch, Duchesne, and Daggett Counties in Utah is such a collaborative outcome.

Vermont is beginning to see similar outcomes. When the Project first began in 2003, Orleans County was characterized as close-minded regarding economic self-development. "Good old boys" were described as controlling development efforts, and business leaders were depicted as "secretive," "reluctant," or "evasive" during business interviews. Since the Project, there appears to be more inter-agency collaboration on economic development activities. Although REAP designation was awarded in 1999, it was not until the conclusion of the Project that community partners pooled resources to support a grant writer to attract rural development funds. Business leaders and other stakeholders in the North Eastern Kingdom appear to be embracing SEUSBIF's self-development business strategies. As the Orleans County economic development coalition matures, positive economic outcomes are likely.

Although it is difficult to assess changing community opinions about people with disabilities, participant outcomes demonstrate enhanced opportunity and acceptance. For instance, one Utah leader was invited by a nearby community to lead a similar economic

development process, two team leaders got jobs through connections they made through Project activities, and most participants reported increased feelings of community connectedness and belonging after participating in Project activities.

Limitations

The Citizen-Led Economic Development Project was intended to explore the role that people with disabilities and human service agencies might play in rural economic development activities. It was not designed to collect comprehensive data about Project effectiveness. Without multiple study sites, comparison groups, economic indicators, and other community-based measures, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the Project's overall effectiveness.

In addition, it is difficult to compare the Project's two implementations because of differences in community demographics, stakeholders, and protocols. Indeed, the lessons learned in Utah shaped the Vermont implementation in terms of economic development activities, Project implementation strategies, and data collection methods. For instance, while Emery County community participants created a new economic development model (SEUSBIF), Orleans County stakeholders adapted an existing model. Likewise, while Utah team leaders provided only retrospective engagement diaries, Vermont team leaders provided comprehensive data that included qualitative interviews about Project participation and ecological momentary assessment data⁷ on barriers and facilitators to community participation. However, despite differences across communities, implementation strategies, and data collection methods, results for the two sites were surprisingly similar.

CONCLUSION

In a discussion of social-capital theory, Perkins, Hughey, and Speer (2003, p. 41) assert: "Communities are not empowered by service and advocacy done on their behalf but only by residents themselves engaging in community action." This fits with self-development strategies that build the local economy with local resources.

Unfortunately, not all community constituents or residents may have equal access to community engagement. Community power structures may not welcome broader community input (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003); and people with disabilities or other disenfranchised community members may face additional barriers to participation including accessibility, identification, and a learned sense of hopelessness.

The Citizen-Led Economic Development Project was designed to jumpstart participation for people with disabilities and the agencies that typically serve them. It provided them with a short-term role and allowed community development stakeholders to formulate cross-cutting goals and learn what resources people with disabilities and human service agencies could bring to the economic development table. As evidenced in these two pilot studies, VR was a welcome and valuable resource for economic development activities, and people with disabilities (participants and non-participants alike) benefited from increased economic opportunity in their communities.

NOTES

¹ *A Guidebook for Citizen Involvement to Create and Expand Businesses in Rural Communities*, can be obtained from the Information Coordinator at RTC:Rural, 52 Corbin Hall, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812.

² The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Patrice Abee of Abee & Assoc.

³ The manual, *A Guidebook for Citizen Involvement to Create and Expand Businesses in Rural Communities*, can be obtained from the Information Coordinator at RTC:Rural, 52 Corbin Hall, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812.

4 A copy of the *Emery County Business and Economic Development Assessment: 2000-2001* can be obtained from the Information Coordinator at RTC:Rural, 52 Corbin Hall, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812.

5 To be eligible to receive TANF funds, an individual's income could not exceed 200% of the poverty level and at least one dependent child had to live at home. Many TANF recipients experience disability.

6 A copy of the *Newport, Vermont Business and Economic Development Assessment: 2003-2004* can be obtained from the Information Coordinator at RTC:Rural, 52 Corbin Hall, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812.

7 Ecological momentary assessment is a data collection strategy designed to eliminate "recall" bias. Rather than reporting about events later in the day, participants are prompted throughout the day to provide information about their interaction with the immediate environment. This data is included in another research paper.

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