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Exploring New Development Pathways in a Remote Mining Town: The Case of Tumbler Ridge, BC Canada

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Abstract

In resource-dependent boom and bust economies, accelerating change has been one of the defining attributes of rural community and economic development research. These patterns of change become more complex as rural stakeholders pursue new development pathways in efforts to diversify and strengthen the resiliency of their communities and economies. But what happens when nascent economic development initiatives are interceded by a renewed resource development? Using the concepts of regional waves and institutionalism, this research examines how civil, civic, and economic sector actors intersect to chart new development pathways in the remote mining town of Tumbler Ridge, BC Canada. We start with a review of Staples theory and the challenges for local and regional economies associated with dependency and truncated development. This is followed by the introduction of regional economic waves that are set against a context where communities, as a result of the neoliberal policy transition, are increasingly on their own to react to the pressures of change. With successive fluctuations in the coal mining sector, stakeholders in Tumbler Ridge have pursued new opportunities in a variety of sectors. We examine how these new economic development initiatives were either abandoned or strengthened by civil, civic, and economic stakeholders in the context of renewed mining activity.

Keywords: institutionalism, staples theory, resource towns, boom-bust, place-based development

1.0 Introduction

Resource-dependent rural and small town places in developed economies have been under stress since significant economic restructuring began in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These stresses and changes have been well described in the rural development literature (Halseth, 2017; Shucksmith & Brown, 2016). They include the downsizing or closure of large industrial resource extraction and processing operations, the long-term erosion of local employment and economic benefits from the historically important resource industries, the closure of services and state agencies—also with concomitant losses of local employment and capacity—, etc.. Beyond boom and bust, many rural and small town places have focused their efforts on economic diversification through searching out new economic sectors or expanding the value contribution by diversifying across existing economic sectors. These efforts become complex as a variety of local and non-local stakeholders pursue new development pathways in efforts to diversify and strengthen the resiliency of these communities and economies. Active stakeholders include residents, households, community—civil and civic society—actors, local entrepreneurs, industry, regional development agencies, and senior governments.

But what happens when nascent economic development initiatives are interceded by a renewed resource development cycle? Using the concepts of regional waves and institutionalism, this research examines how civil, civic, and economic sector actors intersect to chart new development pathways in the remote mining town of Tumbler Ridge, BC Canada. We start with a review of Staples theory and the challenges for local and regional economies associated with dependency and truncated development. This is followed by the introduction of regional economic waves that are set against a context where communities, as a result of neoliberal policy transitions, are increasingly on their own to react to the pressures of change. With successive fluctuations in the coal mining sector, stakeholders in Tumbler Ridge have pursued new opportunities in a variety of sectors. We examine how these new economic development initiatives were either abandoned or strengthened by civil, civic, and economic stakeholders in the context of renewed mining activity.

2.0 Theory

To explore what happens when nascent economic diversification initiatives within resource-dependent rural and small town places in developed economies are interceded by a renewed resource development cycle, we draw upon four theoretical frameworks. This starts with Staples theory and a review of the challenges for local economies associated with dependency and truncated development. This is followed by an introduction to regional economic waves and the structures of institutions, both of which impact the capacity of small communities to react to change. Finally, we add a discussion of place-based and asset-based development as a foundation for rural and small town economic diversification and renewal.

2.1 Staples Theory

Harold Innis was the first to describe the Canadian economy as being organized around the extraction and export of minimally processed natural resources to more advanced industrial and manufacturing economies (Hayter, 2000). He emphasized the concept of ‘staples’ to describe these natural resource inputs and illustrated how the Canadian economy had developed over time through a succession of natural resources (Innis, 1956). As a supplier of staples inputs, Canada’s historic position in global trade has always “been one on the margin of the leading sites of global industrialism and innovation” (Haley, 2011, p. 99).

The complexity of contemporary resource-dependent regions is the result of both historical processes and the instability inherent in the forces of geography, technology, and institutions that shape and reshape their economies. As described by Tonts, Plummer, and Lawrie (2012), resource towns are “inherently vulnerable to volatile global commodity markets and associated fluctuations in production and employment...where exposure to external trends and the risk of economic crisis is exacerbated by a narrow economic base and limited opportunities for diversification” (p. 289). Evolving production and transportation technologies have created broader community disruptions and instability, while for institutional structures the “oligopolistic character of many staples firms necessary for the large capital expenditures produces financial and production ‘rigidities’ that cause disequilibrium” (Barnes, 1996, p. 222). As they cope with current rounds of change, challenge, and opportunity, resource-dependent regions are encumbered by this “layering of past and present rounds of staples accumulation” (Barnes, 1996, p. 222).

Given the abundance of its natural resources, it is not surprising that Canadian national and provincial governments have long based economic development strategies on resource exports. But the instability of such an economic focus has led scholars interested in Staples theory to describe two key problems that flow from a staples-based economy: ‘dependency’ and ‘truncated development’ (Barnes, Hayter, & Hay, 2001; Hak, 2011; Watkins, 1982).

The dependency problem comes from the resource supply ‘warehouse’ function of the economy. As ‘price-takers’, producing regions are always dependent upon the demands of external markets. As economically and industrially advanced regions expand or curtail industrial production, there are immediate impacts felt along the raw material supply chain. Staples economies are thus vulnerable to market shifts. Over time, fluctuations in market demand have become more dramatic—rising faster than previously experienced, going higher than previously experienced, and contracting at similar speeds in today’s hyper-connected global economy.

The dependence problem is exacerbated by the challenge of truncated development. World-scale resource development projects require world-scale firms and access to requisite levels of financing. Since the early 1950s, BC’s provincial policy approach has focused on attracting large industrial capital to realize the potential of massive resource industry development projects (Marchak, 1983; Williston & Keller, 1997). Once in place, the region’s resource production ‘pathway’ becomes increasingly entrenched as industrial capital consolidates its control over a stable and predictable supply of raw resources, its managing role over other components of the needed service and supply chain, and its dominance of local and regional labour. As Hayter (1982) argued, the implication of such foreign ownership “relates to a loss of autonomy over strategic investments and technology decisions” (p. 281).

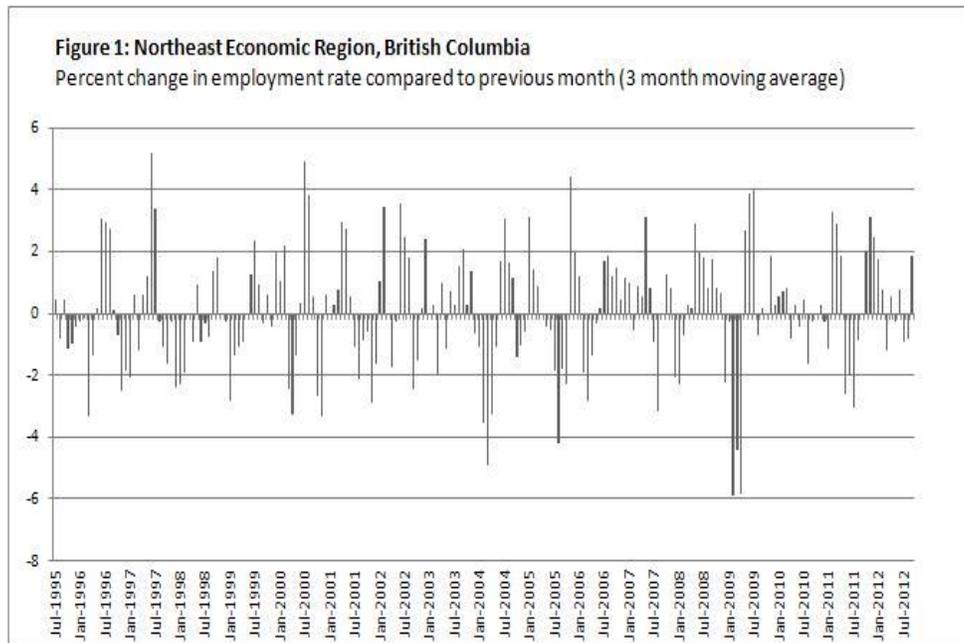
A persistent challenge for staples producing rural and small town regions is that the long recognized need to diversify the local economy can be limited by the dominant industry's requirement to remain the regionally dominant industry. Long-term shifts to slowly transform a dependent region into a diversified region can be trumped by 'crises' within the dominant industry that threaten massive layoffs and loss of tax and royalty revenues unless assistance and concessions are granted.

2.2 Regional Economic Waves

Ryser, Markey, Manson, & Halseth, 2014, observe a change in the pattern of traditional boom and bust economic cycles in the staples-dependent region of the Peace River. They argue that such longer traditional cyclical swings of the resource economy no longer capture the complexity and volatility of the resource region, which is instead now characterized by more compressed and ongoing waves of sector activity. Set within a context of decreased stewardship and responsibility by both industry and senior governments—traditional players in mitigating community and regional impacts of change—, communities are being “forced into a perpetual state of readiness” (p. 88), but with limited resources and capacity to deal effectively with the volatility.

In the Peace region, which incorporates our case community of Tumbler Ridge, Figure 1 illustrates how the region is experiencing volatility in the pace and direction of employment change, and a continually shifting set of fluctuations—or waves—of economic activity over time (Ryser et al., 2014). Important to the analysis is that the fluctuations or percent change in the employment rates in the region vary much more drastically when compared to trends exhibited for the province of British Columbia as a whole (i.e. reflecting broader trends of economic boom and bust).

Figure 1. Percent Change in Employment Rate Compared to Previous Month (3 Month Moving Range).



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, CANSIM Table 282-0122.

The wave model of development holds significant implications for the interrelationship between the operation of the resource sector and community and regional planning. The traditional model posits that during boom periods, regional actors scramble to capture as much economic benefit as possible, which severely limits the capacity for future planning (Evans & Sawyer, 2009). Economic planning is overwhelmed by, and entirely focused upon, the present. Conversely, yet with similar implications for local area planning, bust periods are characterized by crisis response, calls for assistance, and gutted financial capacity (Ryser & Halseth, 2010). Economic planning in this setting is again truncated to the present and focused on mitigating the social impacts of unemployment. The difference being that the bust periods at least create the conceptual space to consider economic alternatives—and elasticity within the local labour market to theoretically support new initiatives. In both scenarios, however, the regional economic planning ideal of persistent, informed and strategic development is abandoned.

2.3 Institutionalism

The third theoretical framework we introduce to support our exploration of economic diversification initiatives within resource-dependent rural and small town places is ‘institutionalism’. Drawing upon Hayter (2008), the institutional perspective “rejects the idea of a universal model of capitalism and describes its generalizations and prescriptions from close observation, measurement and interpretation of real-world institutions that are variously expressed as formal and informal organizations, movements,…” (p. 834). By recognizing a role for the social and cultural conditions of everyday life, and of real world behaviours, institutionalism focuses on how past and present arrangements of individuals, groups, and organizations in different places work to shape economic development (Barnes & Gertler, 1999; Hayter, 2004; Peet, 2007).

Institutions are socially constructed and include formal regulations and organizations and the informal practices, routines, and habits that shape the behaviour of actors. Formal regulation includes laws, policies, standards, and rules. Informal or tacit practices can include local networks, habits, norms, routine patterns of behaviour, and customs (Nee, 2005; Streek & Thelen, 2005). As such, the make-up and mix of informal and formal institutions are rooted within place, and tend to vary across space. The strength of this approach for studying local economic diversification initiatives is that it takes a broad view of economic activity, where different actors—firms, governments, organizations, individuals, etc.—, and different operating contexts, cannot be divorced from the local history or community (MacLeod, 2001).

From this orientation, institutionalism links both place and processes of change. Places take on a prominence as they are the meeting sites for a variety of global and local institutions and for the conflicts, relations, and discourses that shape, constrain, or transform the economy and the community (Amin, 1999; Paasi, 2002). Institutionalism also recognizes that both places and institutions are not fixed, but rather are changing over time. Variation across places is, therefore, expected, and the development of communities and economies will follow trajectories of change shaped, in part, by history, and in part by the actions of institutions and institutional arrangements.

Of particular interest to our work is the role of civic and civil society actors and institutions in rural and small town economic diversification initiatives. A definition

of civic society, for our purposes, focuses on the role of the local government. As such, it is formally organized and ‘rule-bound’ but the legislation governing its actions (Tindal & Nobes-Tindal, 2004). Local government plays an especially important role in rural and small town places as few other levels of government have a significant local presence and its focus on services and economic development make it the ‘go to’ office when community and economic needs arise. However, the downloading of responsibilities by more senior levels of government under the guise of localism and the limited fiscal and staff capacities of small local governments are significant challenges (Douglas, 2005; Dufty-Jones & Wray, 2013).

Existing outside of private and government spheres, civil society groups are independent organizations that can represent an array of common interests and needs that contribute to the well-being of the broader population, largely mobilized as citizen actions through voluntary and non-profit organizational structures (de Bakker, Den Hond, King, & Weber, 2013; de Gómez & Bullock, 2012). As a coming together of people outside the institutions of the state and the economy, civil society creates a context for social organization, participation, and action. As such, it is one of the theoretical and practical cornerstones of community development. Civil society organization provides a mechanism through which to assert local needs and priorities through local democracy and participation. Outside of industry and business, civic and civil society are together cornerstones of local economic diversification initiatives within smaller communities.

In remote, rural, and resource-dependent places, however, the breadth and type of economic activity associated with its natural capital (i.e. fluctuating resource commodity production) can shape the economic vulnerability, and hence the stability of capacity, within a community (Tonts et al., 2012). As Sampson and Goodrich (2009, p. 906) argue, “societal changes are difficult to comprehend without understanding the nature of the dependence that modern societies have upon the physical resource base”. In such emerging and transitioning economies, there can be uncertain and turbulent institutional frameworks (Lang, Fink, & Kibler, 2014). Job losses associated with changes in natural resource production can result in a loss of social networks and human capital for community organizations (Fey, Bregendahl, & Flora, 2006). As boom and bust cycles are occurring more frequently and dramatically, their turbulent impact on organizational leadership, personnel, and financial resources is significant—impacting everything from the networks used to mobilize other resources to the commitment and consistency to implement new strategic directions.

2.4 Place-Based Development Theory

The final piece of our conceptual framework is place-based development. Within this emergent theory of development, place becomes operational and assumes agency in the development process, rather than being a passive platform upon which development takes place (Massey 1994, 1995; Douglas, 2005). The emphasis on the importance of context is found in a variety of rural research themes, including post-productivism; conceptualizations of the role of competitiveness, as opposed to comparative advantage within the new economy; the adoption of a territorial, rather than sector-based, orientation to rural policy development; and new regionalism (Barnes et al., 2000; Kitson, Martin, & Tyler, 2004; Pezzini 2001; Markey, Halseth, & Manson, 2012; Markey, Breen, Vodden, & Daniels, 2015).

Markey, Halseth, and Manson (2008) identify four dimensions that are common to articulations of place-based development. First, considerations of the importance of culture, social and community dynamics, and the environment are valuable assets that may be employed for development purposes. The primacy of the economy is modified by these other integrated components of the development process. Second, place-based development demands the active participation and engagement of local capacity. Local actors and institutions hold local knowledge that may help to identify assets, and are critical for driving the development process, particularly under conditions of decreased industry and senior government involvement. Third, such local participation is placed within a more complex governance regime that may involve the interplay of senior governments, industry, and a variety of economic and non-economic actors. Finally, a focus on place as a foundation for development requires an investment mentality, and actual investment, to nurture and realize local and regional economic opportunities. This entails direct investment in enterprise and initiative development, as well as investments in the maintenance and advancement of critical infrastructure—the platform upon which local economic activities will be based.

3.0 Case Study

Our case study focus is the coal mining town of Tumbler Ridge. Located in north-eastern British Columbia, on the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains (see Figure 2), Tumbler Ridge is British Columbia's newest 'instant town', founded in association with the province's last major resource development megaproject. While regional coal resources have long been known, during the mid-1970s a spike in world coal prices prompted a flurry of exploration activity. As a result of a long term deal with a consortium of Japanese steel mills, two new coal mines, 'Bullmoose'—operated by Teck Corporation—and 'Quintette'—operated by Denison Mines—proceeded. Construction of the Tumbler Ridge townsite began in 1981, and the first shipment of coal was sent by rail in 1983 (Halseth & Sullivan, 2002).

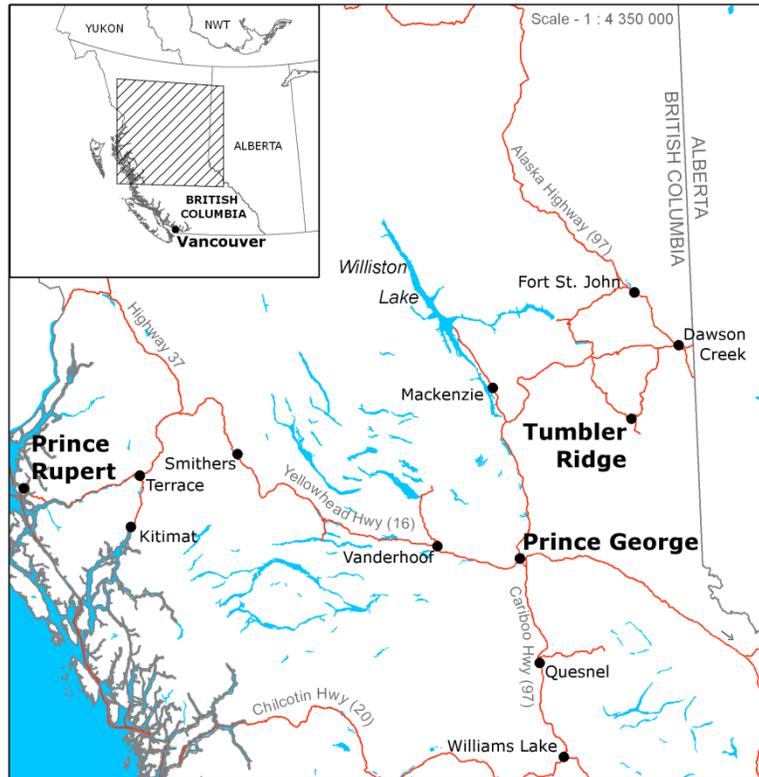
3.1 Boom 1

British Columbia has a long history of creating 'instant towns' to support major resource development projects in remote regions of the province (Markey et al., 2012). Planning for a new town to house the coal mining workforce and their families was initiated in 1976. Unlike with earlier instant towns, the provincial government directly managed the planning of Tumbler Ridge. The design, layout, and servicing of the town was carefully planned and the province financed much of the enormous infrastructure costs such as road and rail access to this previously undeveloped area. However, the provincial government went beyond site planning. When Tumbler Ridge opened, the government wanted it to be a fully functional community and this meant attention to not just physical design but also to social planning. From the start, there was purposeful attention to 'place-making' (Gill, 1991).

Investments in place-making included the provision of a range of community and recreational infrastructure. It also included funding support for a social planner who would help residents organize civil society groups in the early years. The success of these social planning initiatives were remarkable as Tumbler Ridge soon boasted a wide array of community groups and organizations. In 1998–1999, the community had over 52 civil society organizations working across health, social service,

economic development, youth, seniors, community service, sports and recreation, religion, and political issues—quite an accomplishment for a town of approximately 4,500 people.

Figure 2: Location of Tumbler Ridge, BC.



Map credit: Kyle Kusch.

Tumbler Ridge's civic society actively supported the activities of local civil society organizations. Space was made available in community facilities for groups to hold meetings and put on events. Support was offered for groups applying for funding or for permission to use public lands for hiking, snowmobile, and ski trails. The local government also helped with in-kind equipment and land donations for various activities. Flexible and adaptive community-based organizations can respond to both the general and specific needs of residents in small places. The relative strength of these organizations can act as a barometer of community resilience and capacity to respond to challenges and opportunities. In Tumbler Ridge, economic change would test the resilience and capacity of the community and its civil society.

3.2 *Bust 1*

The Tumbler Ridge coal mining industry has had a troubled history. Global commodity prices and corporate restructuring have affected Tumbler Ridge almost since its opening. Soon after opening, the mines became embroiled in a pricing conflict with the Japanese steel mills and this led to rounds of layoffs and the takeover of the Quintette mine operations by Teck Corporation. It also unsettled housing in the town as workers agitated for the companies to buy-back the houses to reduce employee risk. These buy-backs did happen and the town's continuing

strong civil society organizations are even more remarkable in a community dominated by renters.

In March 2000, Teck announced that the Quintette mine would close two years ahead of schedule and this triggered a crisis. In the end, it was a downturn “that saw the loss of more than 70% of local jobs and 65% of the municipal tax base” (Mochrie, Morris, Halseth, & Mullins, 2014, p. 2). While the provincial government seemed to be ‘blindsided’, the local newspaper was defiant:

Despite the media messages, and the abandonment of Tumbler Ridge as a disposable [town] by provincial politicians, there is a strong current of confidence about our future running through town. Many residents are survivors from other mining towns ... [they] call Tumbler Ridge home and are not willing to move. (Tumbler Ridge Community Connections, 2000, p. 1)

Six days after the announcement, the local government had created an emergency transition plan. Once they secured regional, provincial, and federal support, they mobilized their transition strategy. Beyond the short term crisis of the closure, that strategy sought to work over the long term to create a more diverse and resilient local economy. Markey et al. (2012,) note how the instant town of Tumbler Ridge had become a community:

A place with intrinsic values, commitments by families, and affinities forged within a community and the surrounding landscape. In other words, the community was rooted in place, and the community mobilized its place-based assets to create a transition plan when the provincial government did not have one. Their approach capitalized on the very high quality local infrastructure, attractive setting in the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains, proximity to nature, and town design that emphasized accessibility. Tumbler Ridge rebranded and marketed itself as a place where young families could raise children, seniors could grow old in a supportive community, new tourism and outdoor recreation adventure companies could flourish ..., and the natural history of the area could support new amenities to draw visitors and tourists. Coincident with this exercise was the discovery of fossil beds and dinosaur tracks in the river valleys immediately adjacent to the town that provided further assets for attracting tourism activity (pp. 192–193).

In this approach, the town’s civil society groups were counted upon to mobilize many of the diversification strategies being identified through examinations of their place-based assets.

3.3 Boom 2

Soon after the many local diversification strategies got underway, natural resource industries began to return to Tumbler Ridge. In 2004, Western Canadian Coal Corporation opened a new mine between the former Quintette and Bullmoose sites. Others were to follow such that in the next five years three more mines opened. While they did not employ as many workers and did not make the same types of community investments relative to the former mines, they did bring coal miners back to the community. In 2003–2004, Duke Energy undertook a series of oil and gas pipeline and processing plant expansions and upgrades in the Tumbler Ridge area. Some forestry and forest-product processing was also attracted to the area.

But the lessons of the recent past were not lost on Tumbler Ridge. As new resource industries opened around the community, the approach was to welcome these industries while at the same time recognizing that the community did not want to go back to single-industry dependence. As noted, the work of the civic society town government was aided by an array of civil society groups. The next section of the paper highlights the roles of several of these groups.

3.4 Bust 2

The cycle of natural resource downturns would, however, replay again in Tumbler Ridge in 2014 when a collapse in global energy prices hit the coal industry. Walter Energy closed its Wolverine mine resulting in 450 job losses, Teck laid off 90 workers, and Anglo American idled their Peace River Coal mine with a loss of 350 jobs—all in a community of approximately 2,700 people.

This time however, not only did the community have the strength of a well-organized civic and civil society, but between the two periods of crisis the town had achieved a measure of economic diversification. While coal mines dominate the local economy and the local labour force when they are in operation, Tumbler Ridge had more economic activity across more sectors than at any time in its past. A just completed community sustainability plan reported how the community:

...has strengthened and diversified its economy through the development of projects in the oil and gas, wind power, and forestry sectors. Through volunteer-run events, such as the Emperor's Challenge and Grizfest, Tumbler Ridge has established itself an annual destination for many adventure athletes and music lovers in the region. Most recently, also through the work and dedication of volunteers, the town applied for, and won, membership to the [UNESCO] Global Geoparks Network, placing itself on the map as having some of the most significant geological assets in the world (Mochrie et al. 2014, p. 2).

Moving forward, the civil society government has worked to strengthen these new sectors—especially tourism, forestry, and wind power. As a new initiative, a community forest license now places more of the forest assets of the area under local control so that they can be developed to provide multiple revenue streams and meet multiple community objectives. Civil society groups have expanded their work in

the senior's economy, the paleontological museum, the outdoor adventure tourism economy—with rock and ice climbing routes now mapped—, and the music festivals and sports events (Ryser et al., 2013).

As an illustration of the maturity with which Tumbler Ridge is now approaching community and economic sustainability, the new community sustainability plan is organized around eight distinct topic areas. These include focusing on economic diversification, education, housing, health and social services, sports and recreation, arts and culture, land and infrastructure, and civic engagement. Under the topic of economic diversification, the strategic goal is to achieve a “stable economy that draws strength from a mix of different sectors and supports local businesses, jobs, and services for the community” (Mochrie et al., 2014, p. 10).

4.0 Tracking Waves and Attention to Diversification

Over its relatively short history, Tumbler Ridge has experienced successive cycles of boom and bust in its mining sector. These waves are schematically illustrated in rough form in Figure 3. Together with the figures that follow, these generalized schematics illustrate the relationship between resource cycles and economic diversification efforts. There are no scales in these schematics as the illustrated relationships are relative, they are not quantitatively measured.

Figure 3. Economic Development Planning and Resource Cycles.

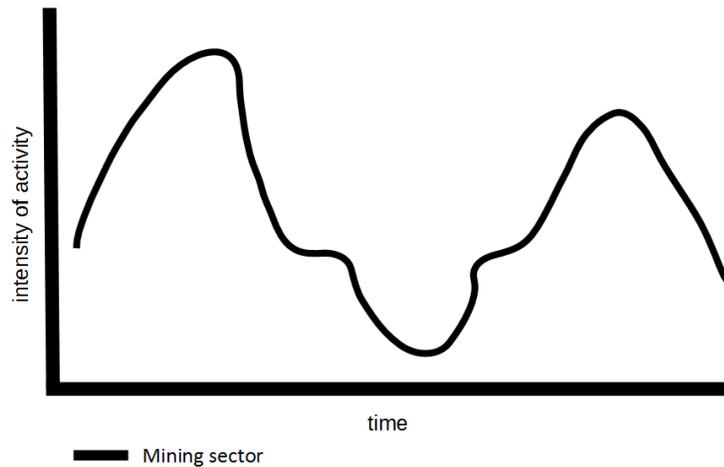


Diagram credit: Kyle Kusch.

The community has tried to apply the lessons from the first downturn so that subsequent resource sector booms could be capitalized upon to support continued efforts towards economic and community diversification. As noted in the opening of the paper, our interest is with this very process of continued efforts towards diversification. The interest comes from two motivations. The first is that too often resource-dependent rural and small town places will only focus upon diversification initiatives when their major resource sector is in a downturn—only to abandon those efforts once the primary industry is again in operation. This continues to leave the community vulnerable, with no progress towards diversification being achieved, and

efforts needing to be repeated during the next downturn. The second motivation is that the key local institutions within civic and civil society are increasingly challenged by neoliberal public policy transformations and yet are increasingly being identified as those who must lead local and regional diversification initiatives. So, what happens when nascent economic development initiatives are interceded by a renewed resource development cycle? Using the concepts of regional waves and institutionalism, we turn to how civil and civic society actors responded in Tumbler Ridge.

4.1 Context

To start, we must recognize that both civic and civil society institutions were founded for specific purposes. In the first case it is for the management of local government issues. As noted in the Canadian local government literature, this has largely meant a focus upon the delivery of land-use planning and hard service provision—sewer, water, roads, etc.—to property (Tindal & Nobes-Tindal, 2004). As the only level of government in Canada not allowed to run surpluses or deficits, local governments tend to be very lean organizations. In the small towns of northern BC, it is not surprising to find local government staff compliments that number between 5 and 20—inclusive of office and ‘outdoor’ public works staff. These few staff are required to address the entirety of the legislated mandates set out for local governments. In other words, they are already completely busy doing their day jobs and increased downloading from senior governments without new fiscal resources and human capacity increases the strain on both staff and the local government itself.

Yet, local government does occupy a critical place with respect to supporting and leading community and economic diversification initiatives. Many local governments have created specific economic development offices, and while not all have transitioned the beyond ‘smokestack chasing’ activities of old style ‘booster’ development, others have. Local governments are also understood as the ‘voice’ which represents the community in economic development negotiations. While it has limited regulatory power over most economic development, it does manage land-use and business licencing processes which can be important. Increasingly, local governments are also being given tools by the provincial governments to help attract new economic development activity through concessions over local property taxes, etc. Again, while these are modern replications of very old and outdated ‘booster’ processes, they do position local governments as key players in economic development processes. Another area where local government plays a key role is with respect to setting and maintaining the community’s ‘vision’. Often expressed through a community planning document, such vision statements are important as they guide the activities of the local government and the expectations of the community members.

In the case of civil society institutions, they are typically founded around specific issues of interest to the group and people volunteer their time to the advancement of the cause. As such they face two ongoing challenges. The first has to do with internal capacity. Maintaining people’s interest, competition from other needs and daily activities for the time of volunteers, the aging of rural and small town populations, and the fact that such places have by definition a more limited volunteer pool from which to draw all means that there are challenges to the viability of voluntary groups. Where such groups act as coordinating bodies, bringing together other groups and

interests, the time and effort required for such coordination can further exacerbate the potential for burnout.

However, as described by Ryser and Halseth (2014), civil society and the voluntary sector are playing an increasingly critical role in rural and small town Canada. In response to senior government downloading and to the closure of market delivered services, the voluntary sector now supports or directly delivers many services would not otherwise exist in smaller communities. The voluntary sector also plays a crucial role in helping communities cope with community and economic renewal. For example, it often occupies a leadership or coordinating position with respect to activities—such as tourism or outdoor recreation—that increasingly are available for monetizing as viable economic sectors unto themselves. The voluntary sector also plays a key role through its maintenance of local and regional relationships and partnerships. Through the deployment of hard won social cohesion and social capital, “voluntary sector organizations are able to mobilize, increase, and bridge various other types of capital to obtain a wider range of resources and information to build community capacity” (Ryser & Halseth, 2014, p. 43).

Taken together, for both civic and civil society actors ongoing activities and transitions make it difficult to stay the course with community and economic diversification initiatives. Day-to-day matters come up and must be addressed. Long term initiatives that may take years to realize are very often sacrificed to the immediacy of the moment—especially in those cases where the ‘moment’ refers to a legislated reporting requirement for the local government or the core motivating interest of a civil society group. With these contexts and challenges, the next subsections look at the pathways to development followed by a number of diversification initiatives within Tumbler Ridge.

4.2 Civic Society

To begin the tracking of attention to economic diversification initiatives against the macro-waves of local economic activity, we start with a discussion of civic society. Following its founding, there was no attention to economic diversification initiatives on the part of Tumbler Ridge’s local government. As described for this and other similar communities by Halseth, Ryser, and Markey (2017), all matters related to the economic viability of the community were left in the hands of the mining companies while the local government concerned itself with service management issues.

Following the first economic crisis, significant attention was directed towards economic development and diversification. The first economic development strategies covered such areas as natural resource development, including initiatives to expand forestry, mining, and oil and gas activities. They also included attention to recreational activity—including both backcountry and ecotourism—and mainstream tourism—including wilderness-based and park-based. The first economic development strategies also included efforts to support and expand local home-based businesses, as well as efforts to attract attention to Tumbler Ridge as a retirement or as an educational center (Sullivan, Ryser, & Halseth, 2014). The influx of retirees attracted by the beautiful setting and the low cost of housing helped build the senior’s economy quite quickly. Such an investment in local government activity is not surprising as the collapse of the traditional economy necessitated efforts across a broad range of potential sectors in order to replace some of the local property tax revenue. These efforts continued through most of the economic downturn.

However, as noted above, local governments can be distracted by other activities. In this case, local elections, emergent social concerns, and other matters typical of day-to-day local government life can divert the attention of staff and decision-makers from concerted and maintained efforts on local economic diversification. Such efforts also encountered some local resistance as many of the proposed new economic initiatives could not match the former mining economy for the number of jobs being created or the salaries being paid.

As the mining economy recovered, the unexpected activity of the local government was to remain engaged in concerted activity and investments of time and effort towards economic diversification. This was an effort to mobilize the lessons from the first economic downturn as the local government began its new community sustainability planning process during an economic upswing so as to capitalize on opportunities and act proactively. They did not wish to be caught unprepared by the next sudden collapse. When that collapse did come, the community was well into the completion and implementation stages of the new community sustainability plan.

The investment of time and activity by the local government in broad-based community economic strategies and the community sustainability plan is schematically highlighted in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Economic Development Planning and Resource Cycles.

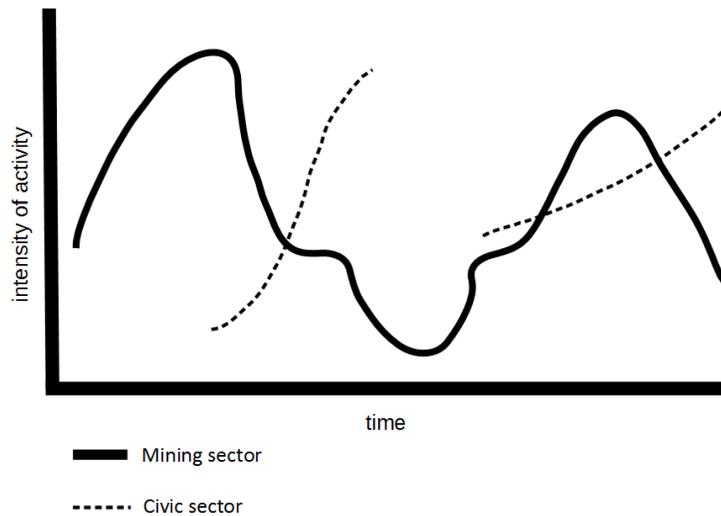


Diagram credit: Kyle Kusch.

4.3 Civic and Civil Society

The next example involves a mix of civic and civil society organizations as the community worked to develop its senior's economy. This is an interesting initiative to track because prior to the first economic downturn, the community had very few older residents—the local demographic was one of young resource-sector industrial workers and their young families. As noted above, however, efforts to publicize and promote Tumbler Ridge as a good retirement community had borne fruit as many seniors moved to the town attracted by its high quality civic services, its extensive outdoor and recreational amenities, and its affordable housing. While part of the

original diversification strategy, the seniors sector soon began to move forward on its own through a series of connected though somewhat independent initiatives.

After the first influx of seniors, the local government began to engage with some of the social and service needs and changes that this new population brought. As a result, the mayor struck a 'seniors task force' to identify emerging service needs and issues, and to come up with strategies for addressing those needs and issues (Ryser et al., 2013). This second civic society engagement with the seniors' diversification strategy included extensive community engagement, consultation, and survey work.

With the completion of work by the Seniors Task Force, a number of civil society organizations began to participate in moving individual initiatives forward. This included a very active engagement by the Tumbler Ridge Hospice and Respite Care Society to bring those services into the community. A local group focused on community and social services, TR Cares, developed a shuttle van service to assist seniors—and others, although seniors are the primary users—in accessing out-of-town medical services (Skinner, Joseph, Hanlon, Halseth, & Ryser, 2016). Given that Tumbler Ridge is not serviced by a commercial highway bus company, this is a very important service. TR Cares, together with local Lions Club, also worked to develop a seniors' drop-in location within the community recreation center.

The Lions Club has been very active with other initiatives to support local seniors. They have undertaken fundraising efforts to assist low income seniors who might not be able to afford things such as new eyeglasses or be able to pay for certain medical visits (Ryser et al., 2013). Perhaps their most significant activity has been the creation of the 'Snow Angels' program. In this case, the Lions Club organizes volunteers who go to the homes of seniors to clear their driveways and sidewalks of snow throughout the winter. The importance of this activity cannot be underestimated in a northern community where the hazards created by deep snow and icy sidewalks can be very dangerous for seniors.

More recently, the local government has again become directly engaged with the seniors' diversification strategy through their work to locate and have constructed the first seniors housing complex in the community. This was a very successful initiative that saw the construction of 12 units of accessible housing in Hartford Court adjacent to the shopping, health and community services of the town centre.

Figure 5 highlights the investment of time and activity put towards the seniors' diversification strategy. In contrast to the previous discussion on the civic society, this schematic line highlights ongoing attention with cumulative contributions building over time.

4.4 Civil Society

The third story involves the opportunities of place: particularly the discovery of dinosaur trackways that then led to the creation of several subsequent but closely related initiatives. These initiatives all moved forward through civil society organizations and were all driven by strong local participation. While each of the initiatives received support from local and regional governments and industry, and later from the provincial government, the work was initiated and guided by the civil society.

The story begins in 2000, not long after the first economic downturn, with the discovery of dinosaur trackways in the Tumbler Ridge area by two young boys

playing along a riverbank. After bringing in experts to confirm the original findings, it soon became evident that the region was rich in both trackways and fossil beds. Among the first initiatives was the development of a paleontology research centre. Originally housed in one of the abandoned commercial buildings in the town's light industrial park, the first iteration of the research centre accommodated two researchers, their equipment, as well as the first collections (Ryser et al., 2013).

Figure 5. Economic Development Planning and Resource Cycles.

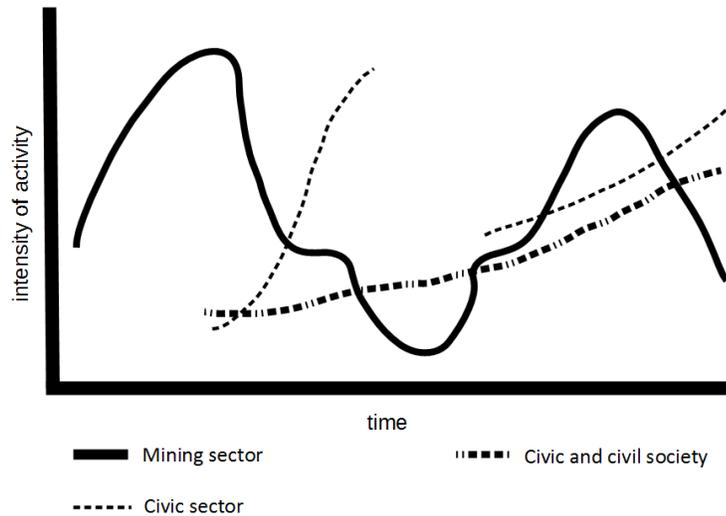


Diagram credit: Kyle Kusch.

With more findings, and with more local, regional, national, and international interest in those findings, a local initiative began to support the development of a proper museum and a much larger research centre. Over the next several years, the Tumbler Ridge Museum Foundation worked hard to secure an unused elementary school building and transform it into the Dinosaur Discovery Gallery and the Peace River Paleontology Research Centre. The Museum Foundation continues to focus its work on securing funding for additional dinosaur digs, educational and outreach activities, and a new and larger museum in the future.

The work at the Museum Foundation recently took another step when they learned about the UNESCO Geopark program. The Geopark program is designed to recognize unique geographical areas that are of global significance due to their unique combinations of economic, geologic, environmental, cultural, historical, and related attributes. They have also been identified as a potentially 'novel' way to help diversify rural economies (Farsani, Coelho, & Costa, 2011). Recognizing that the Tumbler Ridge area would be a suitable candidate, they formed a new civil society organization, the Tumbler Ridge Aspiring Geopark Society to raise funds, develop the idea, and move the initiative forward.

In November 2015, the Tumbler Ridge proposal was accepted by UNESCO into its global network of Geoparks. When it was accepted, it was only the second Geopark to be granted to Canada. The original 'Aspiring' civil society organization has now transformed itself into the Tumbler Ridge Global Geopark Society. Managed by a

12 member Board of Directors, with five local scientific advisors, and 10 external scientific advisors, the society is working to develop the Geopark in accordance with the economic, social, cultural, environmental, and educational goals outlined in its proposal.

Figure 6 includes a representation of the investment of time and activity put towards the dinosaur, museum, Geopark initiative.

Figure 6. Economic Development Planning and Resource Cycles.

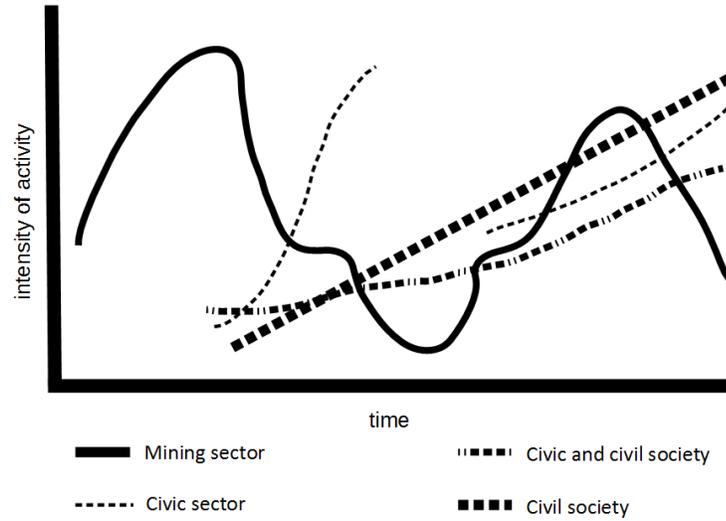


Diagram credit: Kyle Kusch.

5.0 Discussion

Our theoretical framework offers a structure within which to view and analyse the complexity of forces and factors that are shaping the development pathway of Tumbler Ridge. First, through staples theory and institutionalism, we see that history and context matter. Staples theory illustrates the broad historical patterns of resource dependency, truncated development in terms of the absence of any root consideration of economic diversification associated with the founding of the community, and the preoccupation of economic actors with the global capitalist economy. Institutionalism shows that despite these macro trends, development still ‘hits the ground’ in places, and the role of civic and civil society can shape the context of the development experience. Second, regional waves and place-based development describe the complex interplay between industry, senior governments, and local and regional development processes. Regional waves describe how changes in the resource economy, driven by industrial restructuring and the hyper competitiveness and speed of the global economy, affect regional economies. Place-based development offers a development approach that reorients focus—and a more stable outlet for local attention—in favour of local assets and aspirations.

A particularly critical juncture from which to view the interplay of the framework is the start of the second boom. It is at this point in the development pathway of Tumbler Ridge that all of the forces exert themselves simultaneously. The revival and expansion of the coal industry follows a well-trodden pattern of boom, bust, and

ongoing restructuring (i.e. industry and senior governments yielding to competitive pressures resulting in fewer regulatory connectors between industry and community, and a restructured, reduced labour force). The boom absorbed considerable capacity and attention from local government, but owing to the lessons of the first bust, they were unwilling to completely abandon their nascent economic diversification efforts. This decision is rooted in two variables. First, diversification was embedded within the planning process and documentation of the local government, which reinforces an ongoing planning commitment. Second, civil society was playing an increasing role in the evolution of the community and local economy. This engagement and 'buy-in' maintains pressure and attention on issues, which to some extent compensates for the diverted attention of local government. People were invested in the broader process and were not about to have these efforts, and their concomitant considerable volunteer hours and commitments, abandoned.

Both civic and civil actors in Tumbler Ridge have stepped-in to the space abandoned by industry and senior governments under the auspices of restructuring and neoliberalism. When the resource sector is operating, it crowds out other sectors. However, the local government in Tumbler Ridge has taken responsibility for, and resourced, economic development planning and initiatives—something for which the staples-era regulatory framework within which it operates does not make provision. The rapid volatility of the resource sector further reinforces this stand. Similarly, civil society has directly occupied gaps associated with cuts and downloading of services by senior governments, and worked to initiate and incubate place-based economic development activities. Civil society involvement with seniors care and the cultivation of local tourism, and specifically the Geopark, serve as strong community development examples. Through these initiatives, both civic and civil actors display a grinding persistence that gradually affects the development pathway of the community.

6.0 Conclusion

Our purpose here is to seek a better understanding of the roles of key actors within the process of pursuing new development pathways in efforts to diversify and strengthen the resiliency of rural and small town communities and economies. An important dimension of this goal is to consider the implications of scale and impact, particularly as place-based efforts seek to complement, or replace under conditions of resource exhaustion or collapse, the primary resource economy. Even under successful conditions, it takes considerable time, and relentless effort, to supplant an industrial resource sector—even under conditions of declining labour demands associated with technological replacement and other factors. The booms and busts of the mining sector in Tumbler Ridge bring swings in the hundreds of jobs, and rapid waves of uncertainty associated with openings and closings. We see in our graphs above how these episodes dominate representations of the economic trajectory of the community, and how other factors respond to these dominant patterns.

The question of scale is particularly important in Tumbler Ridge for two reasons. First, our research shows a history of a committed civic and civil society planning and action, but that both are vulnerable and under considerable stress from neoliberal policies and structures. Neoliberalism may create the impetus for alternatives, but it does not create fertile ground for such alternatives to thrive. Second, the primary resource economy in Tumbler Ridge is coal production. Despite significant

fluctuations, it has provided a base upon which to construct a more diversified economy. Efforts of the community to expand into forestry and alternative energy are highly prescient under these conditions. We see in these efforts, and in other areas such as tourism, the benefits of a long-term, sustained—although limited resource—economic diversification strategy. There remains, however, an underlying question of economic scale, and the ability of alternatives to sustain or reshape the community away from its staples origins.

The response of the community to structural forces in the economy exposes two final variables associated with senior government roles in the development pathway. First, the absence of a coherent vision for rural development, at both provincial and federal levels, places an extra burden of uncertainty on the regional economy. Despite the tremendous integrated nature of BC's rural and urban economies, rural communities are largely left to struggle on their own, subject to globally significant competitive forces. Second, and related, the fact that local initiatives have to struggle, straining local capacity to their limits, over such a long period lays bare the lack of an investment mentality by senior governments. Even under conditions such as Tumbler Ridge, which benefits from a regional royalty regime associated with the oil and gas sector (Markey & Heisler, 2011), the diversification pathway for the community proceeds in fits and starts, plagued by an underlying uncertainty of the cost-benefit analysis for needed investments—in economic initiatives, or critical infrastructure. This undermines what may be very viable economic opportunities, and means that when opportunities do arise, the community and region may not capture as much economic benefit.

The boom-bust development pathway of Tumbler Ridge tells a story of the complex interplay of historical legacies, structural forces, and local actors. The fact that town planners, and their government and industry backers at the time, decided to build a complete community—set against the backdrop of a stunning BC wilderness—created a foundation for a commitment to place now evident among local civic and civil actors—and perhaps not foreseen against the then primacy of the single-sector resource economy of the time. This commitment to place may yet prove the most relevant of all forces as Tumbler Ridge continues along its development pathway.

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