

The Connected North: Findings from the Northern BC Economic Vision and Strategy Project

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Abstract

Over the past 200 years the social, economic, cultural, and political landscape of northern British Columbia (BC) has undergone considerable transformation. The pace of change has accelerated over recent decades and communities, industries, businesses, and decision-makers recognise that this creates both new challenges and new opportunities. The Northern BC Economic Development Vision & Strategy Project collected input from northerners about suggestions for renewing the rural and small town community and economic foundations of the region. The Project confirmed widespread interest in creating a regional community and economic development framework and outlined key ideas and principles which northerners identified as important for the future. This paper provides an overview of the process and a summary of the key findings. As such, it provides insight into how the people of northern BC view themselves, the northern lifestyle, and what it means to live in the north of the province. Second, it provides a synthesis of a vision and strategy for northern BC's rural and small town economic development, drawn from northerners themselves.

1.0 Introduction

Over the past 200 years the social, economic, cultural, and political landscape of northern BC has undergone considerable transformation. The pace of change has accelerated over recent decades and communities, industries, businesses, and decision-makers recognise that this creates both new challenges and new opportunities (Hayter 2000; Hutton 2002; Morford and Kahlke 2004). There is emerging recognition of the need to coordinate at a strategic level a vision and plan for guiding investment and assisting policy development in support of community and economic revitalization across for the region (British Columbia 2004; ViTAL Economy 2005). The Northern BC Economic Development Vision & Strategy Project collected input from northerners about suggestions for renewing these community and economic foundations (Halseth *et al.* 2004a). It drew from their sense of place and their experiences with the land and resources that have long sustained communities, businesses, and industries.

This sense of place- and region-based renewal builds upon well-developed community economic development (CED) and local economic development literatures (Shaffer *et al.* 2006; Galloway and Hudson 1994). Localist approaches to development find their origins and inspiration from within a broader collection of development theories and practitioner observations. These lessons inform us that communities and regions represent an appropriate scale for development, given that impacts are more readily apparent and transition processes more manageable. CED in particular, elevates these practical orientations to a higher standard. Markey *et al.* (2005) summarize a series of principles common within the CED literature: that development be community-based, participatory, sustainable, asset-based, and promoting of self-reliance. These principles are drawn from a strong tradition of CED and local development literature in Canada that seeks to balance social with economic development (Boothroyd and Davis 1993; Douglas 1994; Shragge 1997; Shragge and Toye 2006). It is these sources that provided a basis for the question driving the research process in Northern BC. Together, these literatures speak to the rising importance of local voices in the community and regional development planning debate (Polèse 1999; Coffey and Polèse 1985)

The Project provided a process whereby northern BC's rural and small town community and economic development stakeholders could provide input into the elements and desirability of a vision and strategy framework for the region. Processes or plans have too often been imposed from outside the region, with people in northern BC participating only to have key recommendations or outcomes changed or rejected (Halseth and Booth 2003; Mascarenhas and Scarce 2004). This legacy has created a good deal of skepticism about economic planning processes. Current economic challenges have also created a great impatience to get on with the task of creating a plan to renew the economic strength and communities of the region. Through this Project, people spoke of a willingness to set aside the skepticism and a willingness to 'roll up their sleeves' to get on with the job of creating a 'made in the north' approach.

The Project confirmed widespread interest in creating a regional community and economic development framework and outlines key ideas and principles which people told us were important for northern BC's rural and small town future. This paper provides an overview of this process and a summary of the key findings. It

opens with a review of the process and methodology for conducting a community driven process. This is followed by a summary of the key themes: underscoring northern life and lifestyles; driving a northern BC rural and small town community and economic development vision; and supporting suggestions for a comprehensive development strategy. This is followed by a review of the Project's main recommendations together with a postscript that touches upon many of the directions now set in place that were prefaced by this work.

The purpose of the paper is twofold. First, it provides insight into how people in northern BC's rural and small town places view themselves, the northern lifestyle, and what it means to live in the northern part of the province. Second, it provides a synthesis of a vision and strategy for economic development drawn from the residents themselves. A variety of internal and external forces are rapidly changing the social and economic make-up of the region (e.g. the Mountain Pine Beetle, the Canada-US softwood lumber dispute, environmental issues, population aging, First Nations land claims, etc.) and this Project provided an opportunity for people to voice their own vision to themselves and to policy-makers.

2.0 Project Context

Since time immemorial, northern BC has been a trading economy (NWTT 2004). Quality of life for its people and communities has been intimately linked to its natural resource base and the organization of those resources to meet the aspirations of residents. With the coming of the European fur trade, however, the economic future and fortunes of the region have increasingly been determined by industries and governments located outside of the region (Harris 1997, 2003). Globalization, in a sense, is not a new phenomenon to the rural and small town places of northern BC.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, the BC Provincial Government followed a coordinated public policy approach based on a model of industrial resource development (Williston and Keller 1997). This led to a 25-30 year period of rapid economic and community growth across northern BC (Halseth *et al.* 2004b). New communities and high quality local infrastructure were the backbone of new industrial centres using the province's rich resource base (Davis and Hutton 1989; Horne and Penner 1992). Since the 1980s, however, there has been considerable economic restructuring and change (Barnes and Hayter 1997; Barnes *et al.* 2001; Halseth and Sullivan 2002; Little 2002).

At the start of the 21st century, the region is home to a vibrant set of cultures within a diverse landscape. It remains a place with rich resource endowments, with one of the key resources being the people who live in, and have made a commitment to, northern BC (BC Progress Board 2002). In moving forward to transform a resource development strength into a diversified economic strength founded on its rich resource assets and amenities, people and organizations from across the region have told us it is crucial that plans be made 'in the North, by the people who live in the North, so as to create a future for the North'.

Three messages drive the Project report. The first is a clear recognition by people and organizations across the region that our rural and small town community and economic futures are connected. This theme of connectivity extends to the

infrastructure and technology which increasingly binds and facilitates interaction, community development, and economic vitality. It also extends to the natural resources and environments that have long supported the economy and local quality of life. People told us that region wide discussions on the strategic options for deploying these assets would both benefit and support local economic and community development. A regional approach has become a popular development tool in other jurisdictions and people and businesses across the region argued that we should consider the same for its potential benefits (Savoie 1997; Storper 1997; Fairbairn 1998; Polèse 1999; Australian Government 2002; Canada 2002; Drabentstott and Sheaff 2002b; Welsh Development Agency 2002). In constructing such a 'regional' approach to issues of restructuring and change across a rural and small town landscape, international lessons confirm how important it is that models be developed/adapted to address the particular circumstances of individual regions (Jones 2001; Macleod 2001; Natcher *et al.* 2003; O'Brien *et al.* 2004).

The second message is that people told us how northern BC wants the tools to coordinate its community and economic development future. There is a keen recognition that resource wealth has long supported provincial development, but that fewer benefits are now being left in the northern rural and small town communities. A properly resourced 'northern voice' which builds upon a connected set of communities is intensely desired. Combining capacity with appropriate resources and tools would assist the region in coordinating its community and economic future (Mulkey and Murphy 2002). The third, and perhaps most important, message is that the economic future of the region must include all of the people in northern BC, and must respect the quality of life and environmental foundations on which those people, places, and cultures are based.

3.0 Process and Methodology

The Project was designed to interact directly with northerners to find out about their ideas regarding key challenges and opportunities relative to the economic development and diversification of BC's northern communities. This builds from the question, "If people in northern BC were going to devise a vision and plan for economic renewal, and a structure to manage that renewal, how would they do it?" As a result, the study process was built around community engagement. In addition, the Project was assisted by an Advisory Committee of community, First Nations, government, and industry interests which provided guidance, suggestions, links, contacts, and logistical support.

3.1 Community Engagement

There were three rounds of interaction with northern residents. The first, undertaken between September and November 2003, included community visits around northern BC to speak with individuals and groups. The second, from February to March 2004, included a series of workshops and roundtable events to review, refine, and supplement the topics and ideas raised through the community interviews and to develop the Project's recommendations. These interactions provided a catalyst for the exchange of local economic information and ideas between government, industry, labour, small business, First Nations, economic development organizations, and community groups. From May to July 2004, the research team again travelled across northern BC to share the draft results and hear

people's views on the findings. All elements of the community dialogue process went through UNBC's Research Ethics Board.

Interviews

From the beginning of September to the first week of November 2003, the Project team travelled just over 13,400 km and visited over 51 communities and villages across northern BC. The area covered was from 100 Mile House north to the Yukon border, and from Valemount / Peace River region to the Pacific Coast (Figure 1). The Project team designed and pre-tested a survey instrument to gather northerners' views on a vision and strategy for economic development. This survey formed the basis of the team's community conversations. Besides a standard set of questions, the survey allowed participants to provide any additional input or comments they might wish. During these conversations many people also supplied background information and materials on community and economic development processes or projects with which they had previously worked. In addition, the interview forms were posted on the Project website and a number of people submitted their comments electronically.

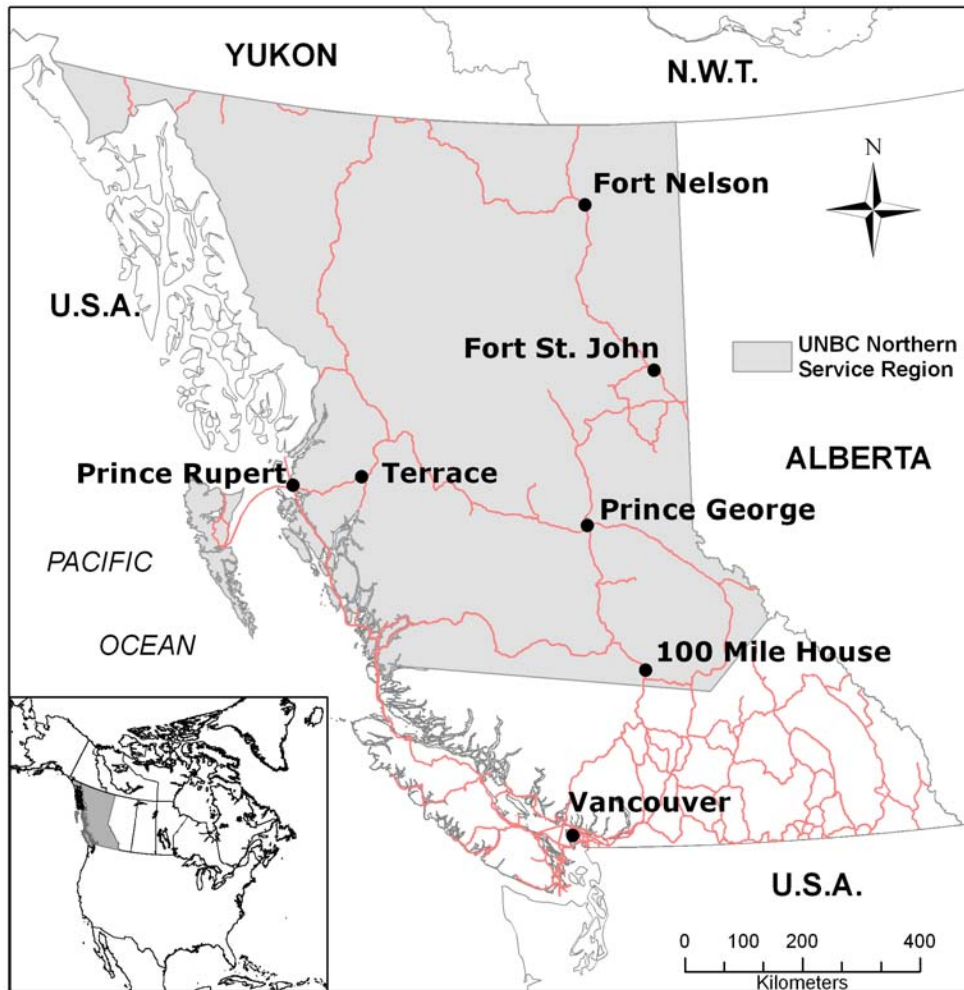
The interviews asked people, businesses, agencies, and groups throughout the region about their views on four general topic areas. The first concerned characteristics of a 'northern lifestyle', and how those characteristics may be important for northern BC's rural and small town economic development planning. The second asked about a 'vision' which might drive economic development in northern BC. The third asked for input regarding 'strategies' for achieving a desired economic vision within the context of an appropriate northern lifestyle. The final part asked for participants' suggestions regarding a 'process' for moving forward with an economic strategy.

The community conversations revealed an appetite for working together to develop an economic vision and strategy for northern BC, and a keen interest in finding opportunities for enhanced community and economic development across the region. People told us about the benefits which they see as flowing from the synergy of regional strategies together with local economic planning. The Project team compiled a summary of the community interview findings and a draft copy was distributed to all participants for review and comment.

Regional Workshops and Roundtables

The community interviews confirmed that residents of northern BC were interested in pursuing the idea of an integrated vision and strategy for rural and small town community and economic development. It also confirmed that they wanted to 'scale-up' their economic development thinking and do this at a spatial scale that included all of northern BC. Findings from the community interviews led to a series of workshops and roundtables that focused on the key questions of vision, strategy, and framework. In turn, input from the workshops guided the development of Project recommendations with respect to options for creating northern focused, comprehensive, long term, economic development policies and strategies that will generate new economic opportunities for residents and enhance the overall well-being of the region.

Figure 1. Study Region



The regional workshops were facilitated sessions with 30 to 40 local participants at each session. The roundtables were smaller consultative processes with no more than 10 participants at each session. At the initial Project design, it was anticipated that four workshops would be held. However, the legacy of past public and private sector 'consultation' processes have created significant feelings that smaller communities, and whole areas of northern BC, have been ignored and left out. As a result, an additional workshop was set up and the roundtable process was added (all despite a limited budget). Table 1 lists the workshop and roundtable schedule.

Almost 200 northerners participated directly in the workshops and roundtables. Draft summaries of each workshop and roundtable were provided to participants for comment and feedback. Once the draft summaries were reviewed, a final copy was then completed and added to the Project's Final Report. It should be noted, however, that confidentiality issues precluded wider circulation of roundtable notes.

Date	Location	Workshop / Roundtable
05 February 2004	Prince George	Workshop
17 - 19 February 2004	Queen Charlotte Islands	Roundtables
26 February 2004	Terrace	Workshop
28 February 2004	Dease Lake	Roundtable
05 March 2004	Houston	Workshop
12 March 2004	Williams Lake	Workshop
19 March 2004	Dawson Creek	Workshop
01 April 2004	Prince Rupert	Roundtables

While the workshops explored a range of appropriate models or vehicles to house a northern BC regional development framework, it was clear that the region wants a bottom-up mechanism to coordinate strategic economic development investments, together with the financial resources to accomplish its tasks. This vision is similar to the regional development council approach now functioning in many jurisdictions in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere (McNiven and Plumstead 1998; McDonnagh 2001; BTRE 2003; Department of Community and Economic Development 2004). In their discussions with us, it was clear that people felt the focus of such a regional model should be communications and coordination, and that this function should compliment local business, industry, community, and economic development planning processes.

4.0 From Strength To Strength

Northern BC's people and organizations spoke to us about an urgent need to raise and address questions of community and economic renewal. This sense of urgency is driven, in part, by the legacy of unresolved treaty and land claims, and has been accelerated by 25 years of economic restructuring (Communities in Crisis Conference 2003). The suggestions made to us for moving forward with a renewed community and economic strength builds on important lifestyle issues, many economic vision and strategy elements, and a range of options for ways to work more cooperatively between sectors and across the region.

4.1 Northern Lifestyles

Rural and small town places have an affordable lifestyle and quality of life that form the foundation for new economic development assets.

In the new economy, people spoke to us about how quality of life and many of the other characteristics which have long described rural and small town places can now form economic development assets (Canada West Foundation 2001; Industry Canada 2004). For example, an outdoor lifestyle and wilderness setting creates opportunities in both tourism and resource development. The small town characteristics of safe and familiar communities provide an ideal setting for

recruiting both young families and retirees (Beesley *et al.* 1997). The northern quality of life can be a foundation for both economic and community development. In addition, BC's northern communities are affordable and connected places for living and doing business. With the connectivity of the 'information age', northern communities are attractive economic and quality of life destinations for companies seeking to relocate from expensive and congested metropolitan areas while at the same time staying 'plugged into' the global economy (Doloreux *et al.* 2004).

When asked about a northern lifestyle, the people and groups we spoke with identified five key issues (Figure 2). These included the role and value of 'northern landscapes' in supporting our rural and small town communities and economies, the independence, resiliency, and pride of the 'northern residents' who have built those communities and economies, the quality of life and lifestyle found in our northern 'communities', the continuing global demands for our resources and amenities that can help drive and renew our northern 'economies', and a deep sense of 'respect' for the culture, values and lifestyles of northern BC's people. All of these issues come together in the places people live and work.

Figure 2. Northern Lifestyles Issues

<p>Landscape:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• intense land, nature, and climate links• rugged and remote places; the 'north' as a part of our culture and heritage <p>Northerners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• pride in culture and accomplishments• wide skill sets for rural and northern lifestyles and economies <p>Communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• quality of life; safe communities• local engagement and participation in community life <p>Economies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• strong resource dependence; vulnerability to global economic pressures• intimately linked with the seasons and the northern landscape <p>Respect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• for culture, values, and lifestyles• for the environment, for remote locations, long distances, and the four seasons

People also spoke about how, along with assets, a northern lifestyle creates a series of challenges. Many of these seemed to be tied to the changes and uncertainties affecting resource industries. While change is not a new topic in the region, there is a general sense that its pace is quickening (Dale 2001; Horne 2004; Hutton 2002). This creates both opportunities and risks, and people told us how a clear economic vision and strategy could assist with embracing the opportunities and mitigating the risks.

The people we spoke with noted three key aspects of change, relative to northern lifestyles, which need recognition and attention. The first involves demographic change. First Nations' communities are growing and have a 'young' population profile (Statistics Canada 2001, 2004). Education, training, and access to economic opportunity are crucial to these young people. Interestingly, people told us how,

while other rural and resource regions in the developed world face the problem of an aging population, the youthful First Nations population could be a key competitive advantage for the region. Added to this issue are the implications of economic restructuring in northern BC's resource towns. Population losses have meant an acceleration of the kinds of population aging seen in the rest of Canada (Hanlon and Halseth 2005). As a result, towns and services designed for young families must now adapt to the needs of older residents. In addition, a new round of economic opportunities must be created to attract and retain young people in these communities. Together, these changes mean a robust and well rounded population profile across the north, one that can take advantage of a range of social and economic opportunities. However, it is also an age profile that will require access to the full range of services.

A second aspect of change concerns reductions in local services. In particular, access to health and education services is crucial for recruiting new economic activity and adapting to rapidly changing market opportunities (UNBC 2003; Halseth and Halseth 2004). Businesses, industries, and northern residents argued passionately that we cannot ignore the need to provide community infrastructure to support economic development.

Third, if there was one issue about which all people and groups in the interviews and workshops spoke forcefully it was about the clear need to reverse trends which have seen a net outflow of economic wealth (Baxter and Ramlo 2002; Azmier and Lozanski 2004). They spoke about the need to not only create more local opportunity, but to keep more of the wealth generated by that opportunity in northern BC. People felt that more economic wealth should stay in the north rather than being re-circulated back to these rural and small town communities through government channels (Lee 2003; Synergy Management Group Ltd. 2003). In this sense people talked about the challenge of cooperative policy development and the need to stop economic leakage.

4.2 A Northern Vision: People, Environment, and Quality of Life

A northern vision is clearly rooted in the interaction between people, the environment, and a high level of quality of life.

The second part of the Project explored elements of a 'Northern Vision' for the future. Through the interviews and community workshops, the message was very clear: Northern BC wants economic development which not only creates jobs for northerners, but which respects people, the environment, and the rural and small town quality of life that defines a northern lifestyle. Part of this vision involves a commitment to equipping these communities to take advantage of new opportunities and equipping northerners to fill the jobs such opportunities create (Barry and Associates Consulting Inc. 2003; Donaldson and Docharty 2004; International Institute for Sustainable Development 2004).

People spoke passionately to us about how a northern economic vision is clearly rooted in the interaction between people, the environment, and a high level of

quality of life (Ostry 1999; Frame *et al.* 2004; Goebel *et al.* 2004). In describing key elements to a northern vision, this Project recorded twelve core areas of interest (Figure 3). These core areas should drive consideration of economic development planning.

People argued that *diversity* across northern BC is a multi-faceted characteristic. It was recognized that not all communities will desire to have the same level of economic development or the same path to an economic future. Across the rich diversity of people in northern BC, different cultures and communities may choose different economic development approaches. This diversity also extends to the multi-layered ways in which different genders and community and cultural groups may seek to participate (Reed 2003). That said, the needs of different age groups, including access to training and jobs for youth and access to health and other services for an aging population, bind this diversity. Finally, people spoke about the rich and diverse physical geography of the region, and how opportunities for constructing a diversified economic base must extend across industry types, firm sizes, and economic sectors.

Figure 3. Elements for a Northern BC Vision

- **Diversity**
- **Inclusivity**
- **Cooperation**
- **Lifestyle**
- **Sustainability**
- **Northern Perspectives**
- **Connections**
- **Human Resources**
- **A Solid Foundation for Community Development**
- **Community Development Resources**
- **Attitudes**
- **Regulatory Framework**

When talking about community and economic development visions and strategies, people spoke about how these should be *inclusive*. They argued that First Nations' participation must be brought into all aspects of discussions and actions. Such processes must be 'bottom-up', include participation by the spectrum of economic sectors active in the region, and involve all levels of government, as well as industry and business interests in the private sector (Counsel on BC Aboriginal Economic Development 2002; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2004; NWT 2004).

People also spoke about how the region needs to collectively move away from bitterly competitive inter-community relations towards one based more on *cooperation*. While some competition can be healthy and creative, people felt that the rural and small town places across northern BC should build a collaborative environment where government and community players interact with trust. Such cooperation also extends to, and focuses upon, the need to settle treaties and develop effective working relationships between aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities.

Northern vision characteristics, such as friendliness, resourcefulness, self-sufficiency, safe and healthy communities, a lack of urban congestion, affordable housing and commuting, and the sense of community that comes from knowing people, were suggested by people as becoming increasingly important. As noted above, these *lifestyle* issues are becoming key economic development assets in the new economy. These lifestyle assets can build upon the already significant contributions which rural communities make to the regional and provincial economies.

The people who spoke through the community interviews, workshops, and meetings were adamant that economic development must support the people, environmental, and quality of life assets so valued in northern BC. *Sustainability*, for northerners, is not an abstract concept but is one grounded in the connections between generations and with the land (Ostry 1999; Pierce and Dale 1999; see also Sasaki 1996). People argued that a northern vision should be robust and flexible enough to ensure continuity between government changes and the boom and bust of economic cycles. They also felt that it should ensure that more of the wealth generated in the north stays in the north for community and economic development.

It was clear from the people and groups in the research that northern BC has developed a clear sense of its place within the province and a strong sense that it must have the tools necessary to shape its own destiny. People argued that a *northern perspective* recognizes that the north needs to speak with a strong and united voice, that there needs to be more local control of resource revenues, that the revitalized vision for industrial development must support our communities first and foremost, and that aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities must find mechanisms for working cooperatively on issues of mutual interest.

For people and organizations across northern BC, their vision for the region centres upon a growing number of *connections*. These include connections between people, between communities, through infrastructure which facilitates communications and development, and through the environment and the quality of life supported by that environment (OECD 1996). Together with enhancing connections, there was a clearly recognized need to enhance our *human resources* (Saunders 2004; Scott 2004). People, businesses, employers, and others spoke about how the realities of a new economy are demanding a flexible and responsive human resource base in order to take advantage of opportunities as they arise (Kunin 2003; LeBlanc *et al.* 2003; Nicol 2003; Petroleum Human Resources Council of Canada 2003). As a result, they felt that education, training, and capacity building are critical parts of a northern vision and should be core values in northern BC. To this end, strong support was offered to the network of post-secondary institutions in place across the north and to other key institutions of the human resource development infrastructure.

Community development, including adequate health care facilities, access to quality education, cultural opportunities, recreational facilities, ‘connecting’ infrastructure such as road, rail, air transportation, and the various forms of communications technologies were all felt to be important for a robust rural and small town foundation to recruit new people and economic activities, and to retain people and activities. In this sense, people spoke very clearly about how the

community development and economic development processes are linked and how both are crucial to the future well being of the region.

People, businesses, industries, and others made the point that a renewed northern vision also includes the *community and economic development resources* important for revitalizing northern communities. These include tools to focus upon our strengths, to balance our aspirations with economic realities, to ‘brand’ our communities and assets for investment purposes, and to tap into the existing array of community and economic development support structures and services (Bruce and Lister 2001). Many suggested that a wide array of resources already exist, but that further coordination between these resources and community users would be of assistance. The point was reinforced by many who argued that a new northern vision must also take a positive and proactive *attitude* towards economic change. The pattern of simply being reactive to crisis needs to be reversed.

Finally, many of the people and organizations who spoke to the Project raised two elements of *policy and regulation development* that they felt were important for northern development. The first spoke to a general need for greater policy coordination so that the actions of different governments and agencies can build together (Pezzini 2000; Isaksen 2001; Drabenstott and Sheaff 2002a; Douglas 2003; Munro 2003). The second was a more general feeling that started with the observation that the region is a ‘have’ area of the province, and then grew to include that our northern vision should include a renewed public policy framework that creates more employment and an enabling context for northern investment. Together, the twelve elements identified for a northern vision pointed to areas of organization, capacity building, and investment. To support these, several key strategic directions were identified.

4.3 Strategic Directions

A resource foundation, diversified opportunities, and benefits for northern communities form the base for moving from northern strength to northern strength. We must re-bundle our assets to create new strategic opportunities and advantage.

The third part of the Project identified a range of ‘Strategic Directions’ for northern BC. Given the tremendous contributions the region’s resource base has made to ‘province-building’, and the high value of our natural and community resources, people and groups talked about how economic transition in northern BC’s rural and small town places is about moving from northern strength to northern strength: from resource dependence to a diversified economy grounded in resource industries and inclusive of manufacturing and a host of other options. Two frameworks were used in the Project to describe suggested strategic directions. The first includes a set of principles to guide strategic economic planning. The second includes a set of infrastructure characteristics to which these principles can be directed.

Principles

People in northern British Columbia identified a number of important principles for guiding the development of strategic plans for renewal (Figure 4). People spoke to us about how the new economy is an information economy where *education and training* are key for capitalizing on changing opportunities. They suggested that the region's educational strategy should ensure that people are trained in the north, take advantage of new forms of technologies and delivery options, address basic education as well as advanced skills training, meet the needs of lifelong learning, address the needs of present and emerging industrial sectors, and enhance human capacity in northern BC (Rosenfeld and Sheaff 2002). Moving to the level of *community capacity building*, the Project heard how the needs of the new economy are creating new demands across the region. In both aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities people spoke about the need for new administrative and management training, and how community capacity development would equip places to deal with change and opportunity. All of these recommendations reinforce the need for education and training and extend them across the life course and to all segments of the community and economy.

Figure 4. Strategic Direction Suggestions

- **Education and training**
- **Community Capacity Building**
- **Youth Opportunities**
- **Economic Strength and Diversification**
- **Financing, Investment, and Funding**
- **Infrastructure**
- **Marketing and Branding**
- **A Collective Voice**
- **Partnerships in Decision-Making**
- **A Framework**
- **A Northern Context**
- **Support Mechanisms**
- **Building Blocks for Community Development**

There is a strong feeling that one of northern BC's strategic advantages is its large cohort of *young people*. To energize this economic advantage people told us that northern BC's youth strategy should include education and skills training opportunities, a youth perspective and participation in creating a northern vision and strategy, links to a global culture to create socially progressive communities, and jobs (Dupuy *et al.* 2000; Jentsch and Shucksmith 2004).

Jobs come from *economic strength and diversification*. People, industries, and businesses told us that the region's diversification strategy should recognize the value and quality of our resource base, ensure that more resource industry benefits are left in the north, and then build upon this base to create a diversified economy that includes value-added and processing sectors as well as other economic sectors. Opportunities within and between sectors were emphasised time and again (see also Statistics Canada 2003). Through it all, people emphasized that new job creation must create employment opportunities for northerners.

One of the lessons people and businesses shared with the Project was that a flexible global economy requires flexible options for *financing* economic diversification. Among the potential mechanisms suggested through the community-based research were community trusts, resource revenue sharing, and expansion of existing programs such as through Western Economic Diversification and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. Suggestions also included the creation of new institutions such as a 'Northern Bank' or a union of northern BC credit unions to support community economic development functions. A second concern was with respect to insurance coverage; an already considerable challenge as places deal with changes in basic services and the more conservative approach to risk that insurance companies were taking.

People suggested that a part of northern BC's *marketing* strategy should include place-based branding. The global economy values the region's characteristics of rich physical landscapes, clean natural environments, and rich cultural heritages. Historical examples such as the 'North Pacific' label to market sockeye salmon in Britain, and new initiatives such as 'Branding the Peace' were used to illustrate how valuable place based brands can be in the global marketplace.

To increase the visibility and *voice* of the region in policy debates and the marketplace, people suggested that one of the guiding principles for the region's strategic directions is to 'scale up' from the community to the regional level. Building on this, participants noted how the region's communities and economies are intimately connected with one another. Recent changes in both the global economy, and provincial legislation around resource development, were raised as illustrations that reinforced this connectivity. As a result, people suggested that *decision-making partnerships* for northern BC should connect within communities and sectors, between communities and sectors, between aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities, and across northern BC's sub-regions.

To move forward, people argued that any *framework* within which northern BC might interact and discuss region-wide strategic directions must be based in the north and developed from the bottom-up. This was said at the same time as recognizing that individual places will have their own assets and aspirations, and that these can be set within, and positively affected by, what happens across the region. Participants argued that a *northern context* for developing such a framework allows it to recognize the 'quadruple bottom line' of economy, society, environment, and culture so important across northern BC. These four elements have been noted above as also underscoring northern lifestyles and development visions.

To move forward on any form of a northern BC development strategy will require *support mechanisms*. People were very practical in their suggestions and recommendations, arguing that we must make efficient use of existing educational and economic development tools/institutions (Mackinnon 2002; Markey 2003). Similarly, people spoke to us about how the development of strategic directions for the region needs to involve tools that create economic and community knowledge. These were seen as important *building blocks* that could facilitate development exercises (Markey *et al.* 2005).

Infrastructure

The second organizing framework for suggested strategic directions includes a set of infrastructure areas against which suggested principles can be directed (Hamelin 2003). The four areas of infrastructure include physical infrastructure, human resource infrastructure, community capacity infrastructure, and economic and business infrastructure.

People, businesses, industry, and community groups spoke to us about the need to renew and extend the physical infrastructure of the region. While such investments were a cornerstone of earlier province building policies, this infrastructure needs to be renewed to meet the needs of a new economy (Harvey 2004). Those included here are transportation, communication, and local civic infrastructure which were identified as being key economic development assets. Transportation infrastructure included road, rail, and air transport facilities, as well as the organization of companies delivering services via those facilities (AGRA Earth and Environment Ltd. 2000; Kjos 2002; Northern Alberta Development Council 2002; Northern Priorities 2002). For example, support for the new cruise ship expansion and containerization at the port of Prince Rupert was expressed across northern BC in the light that potential benefits could be created for a range of innovative businesses and economic sectors. This support was accompanied by recognition that access for small operators to these potential opportunities will need to be effectively developed. This interest in innovation also extended to options for the creative re-bundling of northern BC's assets into new opportunities so as to create clusters of economic innovation (Porter 2000; de Wolf 2002; Ference Weiker and Company 2003; Goldberg 2004). Ongoing innovation and re-bundling of assets is now an 'expected pathway' (Henderson and Novac 2003; Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003). Such assets also extended to local civic infrastructure, including recreational and amenity facilities (which are already strongly developed across the region), together with new kinds of facilities such as seniors' housing (which are not as extensively developed). Many people identified the aging of the Canadian population as an economic opportunity for the region.

Human capacity infrastructure concerns education and training, both for youth and for an established workforce seeking to compete in new economic sectors. As such, human resource development will be a crucial support to regional diversification, and this will demand enhanced access to a range of educational facilities at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels. The needs of the new economy were described as 'flexible' and dynamic, and the Project heard that this must also apply to the preparation of our workforce, management, and governance training programs.

Moving from the individual to the 'community' capacity level, there was a very strong message around the need to renew and diversify our community capacity (Rural Secretariat 2001). One of the first issues raised time and again was the need to settle First Nations' treaties in a fair and timely manner. This would remove an undercurrent of uncertainty and would free local time and resources to the matter of community and economic renewal. The positive local and regional investments flowing from the resolution of the Nisga'a Agreement were often cited. People also spoke about the need to provide health care, education, and social support services across the region in a manner that recognizes the realities of rural and small town

life. Such services were identified as important not only for community development but also as a foundation for local economic development. Finally, community capacity building must also include, and extend support to, the voluntary sector (Barr *et al.* 2004) which provides for so much of rural and small town BC's community capacity. This is one of the points where the success of local community foundations was described.

People asserted that regional economic development and renewal needs to be concerned with creating stable, income earning, jobs which can be the key building block to community viability. In this sense, infrastructure renewal must include our economic and business support and training services; and increasing access to capital and business development advice, especially for the small and emerging businesses. It was noted that supportive agencies already exist and that their roles need to be strengthened, coordinated, and their mandates refined to fit the needs of the region in the global economy (Amin and Thrift 1994). Again, this recognition fits well with community-based calls for more cooperative policy development and implementation to support economic and business infrastructure renewal.

5.0 Recommendations and Postscript

In addition to the information and frameworks for northern community and economic development listed above, the Project highlighted six core recommendations (Figure 5). At the time, the Project team received both support and criticism for these recommendations, but insisted that these six issues reflected directions which northerners felt were crucial to both supporting long term goals and initiating steps in the short term to renew northern BC's communities and economic strengths. Of the six recommendations, people told us that the first two may necessarily unfold over a period of time, while the latter three involve items which could be moved upon quickly. In the time since the Project's Final report was released, events have supported these recommendations. This section provides a brief postscript to the Project by looking at these recommendations and adding an update from subsequent events.

Figure 5. Project Recommendations

- Settle treaties in a fair and timely fashion.
- Complete the electrical power grid across the region to facilitate new economic development opportunities in northern BC.
- Move forward with the next steps in discussions about creating some form of a Northern BC regional development council.
- Direct Funding to "Potential Actionable Items" as identified through our community meetings.
- There is a need for the province to move on the various suggestions for a Resource Revenue Sharing arrangement with the region's aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities.
- There is a need for greater cooperative and coordinated policy development within and between all levels of aboriginal and non-aboriginal government to support economic and community development across the region.

The first of the recommendations concerned the resolution of treaties. There was wide support for the position that participating governments should work towards settling treaties in a fair and timely fashion. While working to complete such treaties, participants in the community meetings also identified that it will be important to move forward with building effective working relationships between aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities (BC Treaty Commission 2002; Skeena Native Development Society 2003; Usher 2003). The future of northern BC, after all, was identified as involving all our people and communities. Since the Final Report, a number of treaty tables have reached agreements-in-principle and are moving with negotiations to finalize their treaties. Around and since the 2005 Provincial elections, the BC Government and BC's First Nations leadership have also been at work to create a more effective framework for interaction. Building on recent court decisions, the Provincial Government committed in February 2005 "to a process with the First Nations provincial leadership to openly discuss how we can establish a new relationship" (First Nations Summit 2005). More recently, the BC First Nations Summit, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the BC Assembly of First Nations, and the BC Provincial Government endorsed an agreement titled 'A New Relationship'. The document, which is the product of senior level discussions, describes commitments on "how to establish a new government-to-government relationship based on respect, recognition and accommodation of Aboriginal title and rights" (First Nations Summit 2005).

It was also recommended that BC undertake to complete the electrical power grid across the northern parts of the province. Access to power was identified by both communities and industries as one of the biggest impediments to economic development opportunities. It was also identified as an area of potential opportunity both within traditional energy sectors and in alternative sources of energy production and use. Since the Final Report, increasing oil prices and renewed interest in the mining and tourism sectors have placed a punctuation mark on this recommendation. In terms of oil prices, many communities across northern BC still rely upon diesel-electric generators for power. In other communities where these diesel-electric generators had played a back-up role, they have been pressed into full-time use. The communities of Masset, Old Massett, and Port Clements on Haida Gwaii, for example, consume almost 20,000 litres of diesel fuel per day through the Masset diesel generating station to provide power (16,000 average through August and 23,500 average through February); and they have none to spare for new economic actors. The renewed interest in mining as a result of skyrocketing global commodity and metals prices has again put the spotlight on the incomplete power grid across northern BC. A number of mining proposals along Highways 16 and 37 North are debating options for power supply with the Provincial Government; but without a comprehensive power plan, the expensive process of grid extensions is years away (Terrace Standard 2005; G.E. Bridges & Associates Inc. and Robinson Consulting & Associates 2005).

Through all components of the Project, there was a strong desire identified by people to move forward with further discussions concerning the creation of some form of northern BC regional development council. The Project's Final Report identified a set of principles to guide such organization(s) and some next steps for debating potential options. The Project also identified a range of models of interest to the northern BC context. Since that time, regional coordination processes have become the preferred development and funding mechanism of the Provincial

Government. First among these was the creation of the Northern Development Initiative (NDI) from funds generated by the BC Rail-CN Rail agreement. The NDI not only created a regional forum that covered much of the area included in the Project, but also created a set of smaller, sub-regional, committees. One of these separate committees involves a special allocation of funds to First Nations. Building on the successful Columbia Basin Trust, the NDI also created a trust fund for supporting economic development investments. Evaluated against the set of principles identified in the Project, the NDI is challenged by its economic focus (rather than overtly recognizing the intimate linkages between economic development and community development), its separation of First Nations interests (rather than creating a forum for bringing together all of northern BC's peoples and communities), and its limited governance structure drawing largely upon mayors (something which does not build-in other interests or those living outside municipal boundaries). Building on the NDI model, one of the provincial responses to the Mountain Pine Beetle crisis has been to fund regional 'Beetle Action Coalitions'. By September 2005, two such committees had been formed using a funding and governance structure similar to the NDI. The challenges identified above remain for these coalitions as well. Finally, two sub-regions in northern BC (the northwest and the central interior) have recently initiated the process of forming regional economic alliances to take advantage of the synergies listed in the Project Final Report.

A wide range of projects were identified through the community meetings and workshops with the recommendation that attention and funding be directed to the ones identified in the Potential Actionable Items section of the Project Final Report. The federal government was identified (especially through Western Economic Diversification and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) as having a key stake and role in community and economic development in the region. Together with the Provincial Government and private sector interests, there exist a range of opportunities to assist with action items that will enable the communities, industries, and businesses of the region to move forward with economic renewal. Actions include network building workshops, economic development information projects, and economic development support projects. Since the release of the Project's Final Report, a number of such activities have taken place or are planned. As noted above, the BC Government and First Nations representatives are working on ways to develop and support collaborative networks and a more effective working relationship. The First Nations have supported economic development, leadership/capacity building, and Mountain Pine Beetle forums in northern BC, and a Northern Economic Forum recently held in Prince George included participation from across economic and community sectors and from across northern BC. In addition, Western Economic Diversification Canada's 2005 business plan includes specific reference to supporting the Project's economic development next steps recommendations.

There was wide support for the principle that local resources should generate benefits for local communities. Wide reference was made to the Fair Share program in the Peace River region and the need for the province to move on the various suggestions for a 'resource revenue sharing' arrangement with northern BC's aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities since this can create more flexibility at the local level to pursue community capacity and economic development initiatives. Since the Final Report, the Provincial Government has

moved in these directions as well as through an expansion of some resource sharing arrangements. In 2004/05, the BC Ministry of Forests (2005) reported that they “provided community forest opportunities for 25 communities across the Province ... [and] twenty-five Forest and Range Agreements providing revenue sharing and access to timber tenure were signed with First Nations, bringing the cumulative total to 47 agreements signed with 57 First Nations groups”. In addition, the NDI and Beetle Action Coalition funds not only direct monies into decision making bodies that are governed in northern BC, but they have had their original funding supplemented by resource revenues. These funds are in addition to processes like the 1988 South Moresby Forest Replacement Account to assist with changes following creation of the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site.

Finally, the Project noted that there is a need for greater cooperative and coordinated policy development within and between all levels of aboriginal and non-aboriginal government to support economic and community development across the region. The recommendation was that some form of a northern BC regional development council could create the platform to support discussions towards this cooperative policy approach. Included among the action items was the call for a multi-level government meeting on cooperative policy development and implementation strategies. As noted above, various forms of regional economic forums and bodies have been created since the Project’s Final Report debuted.

6.0 Closing

The Northern BC Economic Development Vision and Strategy Project sought to give voice to people and businesses, and record their suggestions for renewing the rural and small town community and economic foundations of northern BC. In answering the question, people drew from their sense of place and their experiences with the land and resources that have long sustained communities, businesses, and industries. Despite a good deal of skepticism left from past government planning and policy actions, there was very strong interest in this exercise. People spoke of a willingness to set aside the skepticism and to ‘roll up their sleeves’ to get on with the job of creating a made in the north approach. They poured their experiences into underscoring the fundamental role of northern life and lifestyles to community and economic health; outlining a clear northern BC community and economic development vision that respects people and cultures; and describing elements and focal points for a comprehensive development strategy. Events subsequent to the Project’s conclusion have reinforced that northerners ‘hit the nail on the head’ and that continued actions along the lines they suggested can help renew the foundations of a vibrant and connected northern BC.

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