

# **Communication & Capacity Building: Exploring Clues from the Literature for Rural Community Development**

**Paula Romanow**

School of Journalism and Communication  
Carleton University  
[paularomanow@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:paularomanow@ns.sympatico.ca)

**David Bruce**

Rural and Small Town Programme  
Mount Allison University  
[dwb Bruce@mta.ca](mailto:dwb Bruce@mta.ca)

## **Introduction**

It almost goes without saying that communication lies at the root of all human development, in any context. Thus, capacity building for rural development takes place in the context of communication practices and processes. Historically, much rural development has taken place through communication in terms of education through university extension programs, radio and other traditional media, and perhaps most importantly, through the communal ties which are created and fostered by face-to-face communication. In today's world, rural development is also becoming increasingly tied into new information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet. Further, an examination of the literature surrounding rural development and capacity building reveals that in virtually all of it communication is inextricably involved in the process. The literature also provides some important clues as to why those involved in rural development for the new rural economy in a North American context as outlined in the introduction to this issue, need to pay attention to existing and potential communication tools and practices (or the lack thereof) when building capacity in their communities.

With this end in mind, this article will present an overview of the literature concentrating on the following ideas: 1) communication as a framework of oil, glue, and web; 2) communication and capacity building, that is, the role of communication in enhancing capacity and the capacities that good communications creates; 3) participatory communications strategies; and 4) communications capacity and conflict resolution in rural communities. While looking at literature concerning both the developed and developing world, the emphasis will be upon work that has a direct rural North American application. Finally, the article will discuss what this foregrounding of communication means in concrete terms to Canadian rural communities caught in the midst of global economic shifts, that is, those trying to engage and sustain themselves in the new rural economy

There are, of course, a number of sub-themes found within the categories considered in this article, especially in terms of the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which is beginning to become an underlying component of all of these themes; some of these sub-themes are: youth and ICTs, and the subsequent effect their ICT usage has on the rural culture, including

problems with outmigration, as well as the use of ICTs to enhance educational and social services delivery (including health and e-government) in rural and remote areas, including First Nations communities. However, while electronic communication will be touched upon, the main emphasis here is on the more traditional communication skills which all communities everywhere require in order to thrive and grow.

### **Communication as a Framework of Oil, Glue and Web**

Communication can be considered to lie at the base of the human interactions that make up the concept of society, including those that create community<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, community and communication both come from the same Latin root of *communis*, which means common or shared. As Emke, Bruce & Wilkinson (forthcoming) note, "...communication is a multi-faceted aspect of community life. It can act as a glue to bind people together, as oil to lubricate social and economic relations, and as a web to mark lines of influence and interaction" (p. 27). This concept of oil, glue and web to some extent marries the two common views of communication, that is:

- communication as transmission, most simply articulated in the work of Claude Shannon (1949), in which attention is focused on the passing back and forth of messages: the "how" of communication, which we could also call the oil. This is where the emphasis is placed in much of the early American work on communication such as that of the media effects school (see, for example, the work of Grierson, Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Manning-White, Schramm, etc.), as well as that of political economists such as Smythe, Innis, Spry, and MacPherson.
- the ritual view of communication, which explores the role communication plays in creating society and culture: the "what happens when..." (see, for example, the work of Dewey and other members of the Chicago School, as well as that of Carey, McLuhan, Serres, etc.). This view sees society as existing in a nexus of communication (what we have called a "web" above). As John Dewey stated, "Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication...men [sic] live in a community in virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (1915, p.4). In other words, communication as glue.

Even though these two ways of looking at communication are often presented in an oppositional manner, one might consider them as existing together in a complex interrelated series of relations<sup>2</sup>. For instance, as Babe (2000) notes, the Chicago School, while firmly in the humanist camp, nonetheless provided the base upon which the empiricists later built, since Dewey was the founder of the pragmatist school of philosophy, "which maintains that knowledge has value only if it can be applied" (Babe, 2000, p.22). Indeed, as one considers the body of communication

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<sup>1</sup> Depew & Peters (2001) provide an excellent overview of the history of the conceptual background to the interrelationship between communication and community, starting with Aristotle and his belief that community rises or falls with discursive interchange, and ending with a discussion of the philosophical tenets of the Chicago School.

<sup>2</sup> One might also consider Jürgen Habermas and his theory of communicative action as an example of this.

literature closer to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this debate about communication being “either/or” becomes less evident, especially after the advent of the world wide web in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

This becomes especially apparent if we consider the oil, glue, web metaphor in terms of community capacity building. Shepherd & Rothenbuhler (2001), while not using this specific metaphor, nonetheless allude to it in their discussion of community and communication. As they note, the contradictions inherent in the concepts of both of these things provide the soil upon which capacity can either grow, or wither:

Community is found in time or place, in networks or relationships. It is used to control; it is freeing. It is the basis for democracy itself, or a cover for repression. Although some see community entering a new age of access, growth, and vitality, many others see it withering away. Communication too, can be this, that, and the other thing. Communication is conceived as the necessary symbolic base of community, and, in the form of mass-produced entertainment as the number one distraction from community. Communication can be understanding, empathy, and relation; it can also be propaganda, ideology, and manipulation. Communication can be the very model of democracy, or the very method of its subversion. (Shepherd & Rothenbuhler, 2001 p. x)

They also point out that there is a tendency, starting with Dewey, to assume that both community and communication are inherently good. But, they ask, what exactly constitutes “good” communication? Is it a chicken and egg situation? In other words, they wonder if good communities can exist without good communication, or can good communication exist without good communities? This is a problem with great implications for the concept of capacity building, and one that other commentators have grappled with; it is perhaps articulated most clearly in the body of literature that falls under the second theme concerning social capital, discussed below.

Another strand of theory that brings together community and communication is social networking theory<sup>3</sup>. This field concentrates on “the mapping and measuring of relationships and flows between people, groups, organizations, computers or other information/knowledge processing entities” (Krebs, 2002), concentrating on the ways in which the social structure affects substantive outcomes in a variety of situations (see for example Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Rothenbuhler, 2001). As Liepins (2000) notes in her discussion of how the concept of social networks are able to best encompass the complexities that rural communities of both geographical and non-geographical types consist of, the prominent feature that must be considered is that of discourse, a point echoed by Murdoch (2000). This is also implicit in Healy & Hampshire’s (2003) article concerning the importance of social networks for community resilience.

### **Communication and Capacity Building**

Closely related to the role of communication in creating social networks and social cohesion, is its role in building capacity in rural communities. Although in a

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<sup>3</sup> The importance of communication to most networking theory is seen to be implicit, rather than explicit, and is usually evidenced in an empirical sense, in which communication is one set of indicators used to measure how networks are structured.

general sense, capacity building can be defined as “activities that increase an individual’s, population’s or community’s ability for growth, development, or accomplishment” (Humboldt Area Foundation, 2001.), in much of the literature, it is defined much more specifically as “Activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills and abilities of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities” (Community Safety Advisory Service, n.d.). Here the emphasis is on more formal, organizational training of the voluntary sector<sup>4</sup> (e.g., Harrow, 2001; McCall, 2003; Murray & Dunn, 1995; Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2004; Osborne, Williamson & Beattie, 2002; Simpson, Wood & Daws, 2003, etc.). Further, very little of this literature deals explicitly with the role of communication in developing capacity<sup>5</sup>; rather, where communication is mentioned, it is usually to do with building communications capacity in a formalized “public relations” manner (e.g., Conway & Rademacher, 2004).

However, having said that, like the body of work concerning social networks, much of this literature implicitly involves communication, although not foregrounded as such. For instance, in their discussion of developing community leadership capacity in South Africa, Kirk and Shutte (2004) explore the issues related to developing empowerment, which they suggest is the capacity of a system where power is unequally distributed to engage in enterprising dialogue. They end by proposing a community leadership development framework that comprises three components: leading change through dialogue, collective empowerment and connective leadership. Walter (2003) also stresses the importance of discourse in his discussion of developing capacity in communities where market-based initiatives are failing to provide economic security, such as when a resource based industry collapses. Wescott (2002) summarizes initiatives in the area of capacity building between communities, governments and universities since the World summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992; among the key findings is the importance of discourse between various stakeholders, from the community level to universities to all levels of government in order to create useful and viable partnerships. He particularly stresses the importance of grass roots communication (“bottom up”) to the capacity development process.

Increasingly, capacity building is involving the use of ICTs, especially the internet and e-mail. This is another trend noted in the literature that combines communication and capacity building. Of particular interest is an article by Donovan, Taylor, Tharp, and Lloyd (2002) whose case study involves the development of a community through e-mail; they outline how using this type of communication developed strong cohesion among parents whose children attended a rural school threatened with closure, and discuss the role of informational control and empowerment in capacity building. Mabudafhasi (2002) discusses the use of

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent critical overview of the theoretical roots of the concept of capacity building, see Harrow (2001), who explores the concept’s development in the international, national and local community literature. The article concludes that the concept appears theoretically homeless and emphasizes the need for clarification of the concept’s multiple meanings, so that the chances of a useful evaluation of publicly funded capacity building programs might be enhanced.

<sup>5</sup> The University of Guelph’s Don Snowden Communication for Social and Environmental Change is one of the few programs which focuses on communication in a capacity building sense. The program’s website contains a wealth of information: <http://www2.uoguelph.ca/snowden/#>

distance education for capacity building in a number of South African communities in a region which is rapidly shifting from being economically dependent on resource-based industries, especially diamond mining, to a more economically diverse base. Huggins and Izushi (2002) and Lennie, Hearn, Simpson and Kimber (2005) consider the importance of developing community capacity surrounding ICTs, given the increasing importance of these technologies in rural service delivery. This latter sub-theme is brought out in most of the literature concerning rural communities lacking technological capacity due to the “digital divide”; there is increasing importance being placed on the ability of communities to provide capacity building through the use of ICTs, especially in terms of health promotion (see, for example, Averill, 2003; Joffres, Heath, Farquharson, Barkhouse, Hood, Latter, & MacLean, 2004; Smith, Littlejohns & Thompson, 2001; Woloschuk, Crutcher & Szafran, 2005, etc.). Schuler (forthcoming) stresses the concept of “civic intelligence” and describes how mediated community networks can build and foster it within both place-based and virtual communities.

On the other hand, a much smaller body of literature concerning communication and capacity building stresses the importance of non-mediated local knowledge and how it is passed on. For instance, informal capacity building through intergenerational discourse, while most evident in the body of literature dealing with capacity building in indigenous populations (see, for example, Briggs; 2005; Harmsworth, 2002; Scrimgeour & Iremonger, 2004; Smith, 2002 etc.), nevertheless is acknowledged by a few commentators. Ritchie (2000), discussing this in a Japanese context, notes the importance of passing down knowledge orally for sustainability in community development. Some authors decry the ever-expanding range of technology, and the decreasing linearity of communication potential; Milojevic (2002) for instance, discusses ways in which globally mediated communication is creating unequal capacities in terms of economics, language, religion, and interaction with nature. Parker and Sofiarini (2002) show how, in terms of community capacity building, it is often conversation between individuals that has the most impact on learning. This thought is echoed by Inayatullah (2002) who says:

The process of communication thus is a central way out – conversation both as methodology and as solution. It is this imagination of conversation – of deep participatory democracy – that is central to the creation of a third space of social and political activity outside the sphere of the prince (the state) and of the merchant (capital)...Ultimately, it is about conversations that are sustainable: meaning cooperative, shared and concerned with future generations. (pp.7-8)

While essentially agreeing with the idea of non-mediated conversation as important to capacity building, Balthelt, Malmberg and Maskell (2004) debate about the efficacy of “local buzz,” as they call it. They suggest that by directing such tacit knowledge into more efficient communicational channels (or “pipelines”) new outward channels may be created, which could prove to have economic benefits. Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins (2004) consider the dismissal of local knowledge in regard to rural community capacity building in an Australian context, and the often privileged role of expert knowledge; they stress the:

central role of such expertise in defining, governing, and setting limits on, the capacities of rural communities to respond to change. In addition,...a key

effect of expert knowledge is the production of categories of risk in which those communities that follow the prescribed paths of development are represented as 'active', responsible and worthy of government funding, while those who do not are marginalized and targeted as risky and irresponsible (p. 290).

Interestingly, they do not mention communication explicitly in their theoretical discussion, but in their case studies of two Australian rural towns, various means of communication and the resulting capacity are illustrated. Shirlow and Murtagh (2004) echo some of their critique in considering who decides what capacities should be built in a city in crisis in Northern Ireland. Finally, Rothenbuhler (2001) suggests capacity building must come from within a community, rather than through the outside intervention of "experts"; this can only happen through discourse between and among community members. This of course echoes Habermas's concept of communicative action, which at its root is about capacity building, although not explicitly so.

Other commentators are more critical of the concept of capacity building itself. For instance, McCall (2003) notes that the current emphasis on capacity building in community development rises out of a government move towards devolution of job creation by to the private sector, the growing currency of self-help, and the reduction in government social programs, and cautions that commitment from government must be there for the long term, since community development is by its nature a slow progress. Shortall (2004) voices some concern that in the rush to develop rural community capacities which foster economic sustainability, those which concentrate on social and civic development are being overlooked. Simpson, Wood and Daws (2003) echo this concern, and suggest that government, in its attempts to develop rural capacity, needs to enable and empower while allowing rural communities to identify their own needs and development direction. This is echoed in Banks and Shenton's (2001) critical evaluation of capacity building methodology. They note that:

some of the approaches that adopt the strategic approach to capacity building...and the implication that capacity can be 'built' – rather like a bucket can be filled and its contents measure – signal caution not just in the use of the term, but also in its implementation. We need to question whose purpose capacity building is serving and ensure that local residents are not mere 'puppets' in the regeneration game played out by large national, regional and local agencies. (p.297)

Finally, Williams (2004) suggests that government initiatives at capacity building in local community groups too often privilege a culture of community involvement which is more characteristic of affluent populations and which relatively few community members engage in; this model of capacity building tends to disregard the informal acts of communicative one-to-one engagement that are both a more popular form of community involvement and more characteristic of the participatory culture of less affluent populations.

The concept of learning through communication is implicit in capacity building. Often, adult educators, who might also be termed capacity builders, are at the foreground of such efforts. Indeed, the efforts of the Antigonish and other co-operative movements in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were based upon communication; kitchen table discussions among community members developed into what Father

Jimmy Tompkins termed “really useful knowledge” in the absolute sense of bottom-up development. Harris (2002) terms this type of learning “communicative learning,” which she describes as “the process whereby people come to understand more fully their particular social, cultural, economic and political situations and are thus able to effect greater control over their own affairs” (p.32). She stresses, however, that while communication lies at the core of all types of programs which deal with capacity building, each of these must be individualized for the context they are to be delivered in, and must concern not just those things which contribute to economic capacity building, but also social and civic development.

One last theme that fits within the capacity building body of literature is that of the development of youth. Youth outmigration is a major problem in rural communities; when young people leave, and don’t come back, in many ways they take with them the community’s future. While to some extent this is ameliorated somewhat by new people moving into rural communities<sup>6</sup>, and by some rural community’s initiatives to encourage young people to return home to work (see George, 2004b, for instance), nonetheless emphasis is being placed on involving youth in community development in many rural communities. As Checkoway (1998) and Checkoway, Richards-Schuster, Abdullah, Aragon, Facio, Fiuroa, Reddy, Welsh and White (2003) note, despite media depictions of troubled youth, and the emphasis on the deep need for social services in rural areas to help them, young people are, for the most part, competent citizens with much to offer their communities. McGrath (2001) looks at youth in Western Ireland, and describes how their scope for action is shaped and mediated by social practices and relations within their communities, especially in times of economic restructuring. He concludes that policy that enables youth to participate in community development on their terms would go a long way to encourage youth to stay in their rural communities. Checkoway et al (2003) look at one specific youth-oriented program in a US context. The authors caution that the success of this program cannot be considered typical in development endeavours, since youth are too often a problematized object of development initiatives instead of active participants in problem solving. In an earlier study, Checkoway (1998) looks at a number of youth capacity building programs, and draws the same somewhat pessimistic conclusion; he states that since so many problems in development are systemic, and have their roots outside the community, while efforts to involve youth are to be admired, they cannot in and of themselves solve development problems.

Other commentators are somewhat more optimistic, however. For instance, Smith, Smith, Boler, Kempton, Ormond, Cheh and Waetford (2002) describe a New Zealand project aimed at giving rural youth a chance to voice their feelings about what it means to be living at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This particular research project was interesting in that it arose from a grant for young researchers and was thus designed by young people for young people; this in turn shaped the themes that arose, such as “not being listened to.” The authors conclude that instead of a homogenous concept of rural childhood, there are many possibilities inherent in the idea of growing up rural, often based on geographical location, ethnic background, etc. They also note that although the youth involved in the project were “vehemently clear about the ways in which they were excluded from

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<sup>6</sup> See Johnston, Swallow, Tyrrell and Bauer (2003) for an interesting discussion of the role new residents of rural communities play in development and conservation efforts. Field research currently being conducted by Romanow confirms many of their findings.

participating in community life and their strategies of resistance, rural youth in this study also provided analysis which showed their commitment to positive possibilities which they saw as part of rural lives and communities” (p.157). In another interesting article, McDevitt and Chaffee (2002) propose a model of family communication that encourages youth to change negative patterns of communication within the family. Calling this a “trickle up influence,” they suggest that young people can actually get their parents involved in civic matters by being the ones to initiate political discussions at home. Camino (2005) describes a community-based service learning (CBSL) program put in place in two rural American schools. This program, which was run through the 4H program, stressed youths’ participation in and initiation of community based activities to foster community development. As the author notes:

The practices described here also highlight that in community building, learning is not just learning for the sake of youth; all in the community can become learners. Residents learned about their communities through asset mapping activities and reflection sessions led by youth. The vehicle for the youth to do this, CBSL, focused on community building that aimed to promote broad critical learning about the community, including the contexts of history, culture, economics, and politics. (p.8).

Finally, in a dated study, LeBaron (1975) shows how by engaging youth as active participants in what he calls the three major influences in a child’s life – school, community and television, which he suggests often act at cross purposes to each other – they can be given a sense of participation in their community. This is done by having youth produce programming on civic issues for their local community channel.

In a more recent vein, other commentators have discussed how the advent of ICTs is actually encouraging youth to either remain in, or return to, their rural communities to live. Valentine and Holloway (2001), for instance, explore the ways in which rural youth use ICTs such as the internet, especially in terms of chat rooms and e-mail. They conclude that rural adults would do well to look at how their children use ICTs in their everyday life, instead of concentrating on these technologies solely as tools to encourage future employment or educational opportunities, since they have now become interwoven into their children’s sense of themselves in the world. Laegran (2002) echoes this in her study of two internet cafés in rural Norway. She challenges the view that the internet is an urban phenomenon and a practical means to accomplish global reach, because she says use among rural youth is often shaped by their local context.

### **Participatory Communications Strategies**

One of the most important elements of community capacity building is the leading role taken by the community itself; often, the most effective initiatives have been developed from the bottom up, not imposed upon a community. Another term for this type of communicatory practice is participatory communications (PC). PC, also referred to as development communication, has been defined by the Community Education Network in southwestern Newfoundland as: “the methodology of participatory communications is respect for local knowledge and local ways of doing things. Learners and facilitators are peers in a long process of self-development and social awareness. The process mobilizes individuals to analyze and plan for their own future and the future of their communities” (n.d.).



While this certainly isn't the only definition in existence for this concept, it was found to be the one that best sums up the basic tenets of PC. In essence, it is communication by community members for community members in an attempt to create positive development and change for the community.

The theoretical roots of participatory communication can be found in the adult education literature. The literature leaves no doubt that the concept springs from the work of the Antigonish Movement and other co-operative movement writers, as well as from Paolo Friere, Jürgen Habermas, John Dewey, and a number of other education theorists. This is borne out by much of the writing dealing with the theoretical aspects of participatory communication. For instance, Dervin and Huesca (1999), focusing on the communication for development literature that has come out of Latin America in recent years, identify six metatheoretic aspects: authority, naturalism, cultural relativism, constructivism, postmodernism, and communitarianism. They stress, however, that of these metatheories, communitarianism is the one that best embodies an approach that is both socially constructivist, and practically process-oriented. Jacobson (1993) draws upon the work of Dewey and the Pragmatists to argue that participatory communication recognizes the central role of values in constituting knowledge while at the same time committing to no single normative position. Thus he contends that the use of such a method allows for flexibility in a variety of development situations. Further, Jacobson and Storey (2004), using Habermas' theory of communicative action with a focus on the concepts of "ideal speech" and the "public sphere," conduct an analysis of a case study of population programs in Nepal to illustrate that participatory communication works not just at the small scale "village level" but also on a larger national and even international scale. Drawing upon more recent theory, the articles in Jacobson and Servaes'(eds.) (1999) book, "Theoretical Approaches to Participatory Communication" identify and explore the relevance of such theories as postmodernism to the concept. Drawing upon practical, field-based experiences (mostly from the developing world), the authors in this book address community participation, communication and culture from specific contemporary theoretical perspectives. Finally, Tufte (2004) proposes a concept of participatory communication which he suggests combats Beck and Willms (1992) idea of today's world as being a risk society, as well as Bauman's (1998) of our "liquid modern world" (p.viii). Rather, argues Tufte, communication for social change "is an approach to communication which recognizes the fact that to pursue sustainable solutions to the development challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century...we must address – and communicate – the root causes of these problems" (p.3-4).

While in general, those directly involved with bottom-up participatory communication initiatives are overwhelming in their praise for the method (see below), there are still some who are critical of the concept. Servaes and Arnst (1999), while generally in favour of the PC approach, nonetheless point out that there is a lack of interest in the process among influential

academic and political figures because often these types of programs do not result in quantifiable results; since funding agencies in general require programs with highly specified time frames, clearly articulated outcomes, and easily summarized evaluations, they often reject proposals for funding such qualitative projects. Berkowitz and Muturi (1999) point out that especially in a developing world context, too often participatory communications programs are top-down processes that only pay lip service to community participation. It is easy to see the potential for this if we accept the authors' definition of PC strategies as pertaining to the creation of "conditions for and facilitating dialogue between programs and the stakeholders" (p.3). McLoughlin (2000) agrees, and calls for a shift in thinking in academic circles towards empowerment of a community driven model, especially where ICTs are involved. Indeed, one of the major criticisms found in the literature is the question of who participates and who benefits (see, for instance, Hayward, Simpson & Wood, 2004; Huesca, 1995; Kapoor, 2002; White, 2004, etc.). As Berkowitz and Muturi (1999) note, often the poor, those living in rural and remote areas, and those without access to communication infrastructure tend to be left out of the participatory decision making process. The potential for this is echoed in White, Nair and Ascroft (1994), although on the whole this book is positively inclined towards participatory communication. In short, as Berkowitz and Muturi (1999) point out:

Overall, authors tend to portray development communication in black-and-white terms, where the approach is, on the one hand, fully manipulative of the people who programs are designed for, or on the other hand, entirely willing to respond and incorporate whatever suggestions are offered by recipients of a program's concerns. The role of the communication...typically is portrayed as either a technician or a researcher/technician who tries to understand local people in order to more effectively implement a communication program" (p.3).

The above quote points to one of the basic tenets of participatory communication's best practices, that is, it must be a bottom up community-driven process. Moore (1986) suggests that the success of participatory communication depends on achieving a judicious balance between goals, resources, messages and strategies designed for specific and different objectives, locations, and situations; in other words, designs for participatory programs are not necessarily transferable, and there is no universal model.

Thus, while there are a vast number of program examples available on the internet, only a few broader examples will be outlined here, since many of these are aimed toward a developing world context. Hilbruner (1996) describes the methods used by USAID's GreenCOM Project, which concentrates on environmental problems. She has conducted an analysis of a number of project initiatives, especially those which relate to protected areas, and drawn up a list of best practices. Above all, she notes that strategic participatory communications is a process that foregrounds the human dimension instead of the technical. Gumucio Dagron (2001) outlines a number of case studies from the developing world to illustrate his point that both traditional media and more traditional forms of communication are being

successfully employed in community development work. Among these are dance, music, storytelling and drama. Otsinya and Rosenberg (1997) use a case study of a tree planting project to show why participatory communication is essential to the success of rural development projects. This is an interesting article in that it not only shows what went right with the process, but also what went wrong; in most instances, problems arose when local farmers were not fully involved in the planning process. UNICEF also presents an excellent example of participatory communications and capacity building among youth in Jamaica. The "Right to Know" initiative focuses on empowering youth to address youth issues (n.d.). Bierle and Konisky (2000) discuss the role of values, conflict and trust in several case studies of environmental planning in the Great Lakes region of the US, and conclude that empowerment and trust especially must be present in order for participatory communication strategies to work.

Another set of examples of participatory communication strategies draws upon use of the web for community participation. For instance, Kanungo (2004) notes that too often problems with infrastructure and access diminish the great potential of the Internet for participatory communications initiatives. However, he uses an innovative Indian case study to show that social processes can form a viable basis for providing sustainability to ICT initiatives in rural regions. Musso, Weare and Hale (2000) examine the ways in which using ICTs can promote local governance through both entrepreneurial and participatory models drawn from California. Although not always explicitly using the term participatory communication, the body of literature that discusses the role of community-based networks often stresses the idea of community participation. Ramirez, Aitkin, Kora and Richardson (2005) do an excellent job of evaluating community-based networks in this regard. They note that sustainable development is a long process, and show how communities can use the data gathered from community web sites to support community participatory communications initiatives. Odasz (n.d.b) outlines how by using interactive Internet technologies, Alaskan native villages were able to realize cultural and community sustainability. Lennie, Simpson and Hearn (2002) describe their Learning, Evaluation, Action & Reflection for New Technologies, Empowerment & Rural Sustainability (LEARNERS) process, which was a pilot project aimed at empowering community members to conduct participatory evaluations of development initiatives which employ ICTs. This innovative project exemplifies the concepts of participatory communication, and concludes that without such methods, ICT initiatives are difficult to sustain. Finally, Williamson (2003) shows how, in a New Zealand context, interactive community websites are promoting discourse and civic engagement.

All of these examples emphasize the communication by community members for community members' aspects of participatory communication. Perhaps more importantly, however, they provide ample evidence that not only are communities more than capable of developing strategies to solve their own problems, but that indeed, without community input, most problems will not be resolved.

### **Communications Capacity and Conflict Resolution in Rural Communities**

While at first glance the concepts of participatory communication and communication in terms of conflict resolution may appear to be opposite sides of the coin, one foregrounding co-operation, the other conflict, in fact, they are closely related: both seek a consensus in order to concentrate on moving forward.

And of course, the idea of communication is inherent in conflict resolution. For it is only through exhibiting good communication skills that conflicts can in fact be resolved. If we think of the basic communication model of sender → message → receiver, then we can say that conflict essentially arises when the message, for whatever reason, can't get through "noise"<sup>7</sup> to be received by the receiver. Thus by building capacity in communication skills, while perhaps never eradicating noise completely, it can at least be worked around<sup>8</sup>.

The literature in the area of conflict resolution in the context of rural communities suggests that conflict can arise from a number of sources. Perhaps the largest current source of conflict in the North American, and possibly European, context is the increasing encroachment of non-rural residents and/or development into the rural environment. Gillis (2004) outlines a few examples of this, going so far as to say "Fact is, country folk had best get used to living in an urban world, because city values are fast taking over their communities" (p.56). He gives two examples of instances where transplanted urbanites banded together to stop local farms from engaging in practices which they said interfered with their enjoyment of their new homes; however, he also quoted the farmer as regretting that the conflict between him and his neighbours had been allowed to escalate into a court battle: "A smile goes along way," he noted. After all, not all communication is verbal!<sup>9</sup> A recently completed research project from the University of Guelph under the direction of Dr. Wayne Caldwell is aimed at identifying the sources for such conflict, and then providing a method to try to resolve problems. Entitled "Conflict resolution in rural Ontario: Strategies for Responding to the Environmental, Economic and Social Impacts of Agriculture"<sup>10</sup>, it has been trying to identify best practices for conflict resolution in rural environments. One of the major initiatives of this project has been to help communities to set up farm mediation committees; however, Caldwell stresses that such a body will only be of use if done with support from the community and local farm groups, a sentiment reiterated by Shirlow and Murtagh (2004). Caldwell notes that mediation committee members must be objective, level-headed, and have good listening skills. McTavish (2005) echoes this in his factsheet outlining how conflicts between farmers and their neighbours can be prevented by education on both sides. Finally, Fiske (2000) does an excellent job breaking down the stages that occur in an environmental conflict, and showing how a variety of intervention practices can be used to resolve, or at least defuse such conflicts.

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<sup>7</sup> Noise can be anything from actual extraneous noise to attitudes and beliefs, world views, language, culture etc.

<sup>8</sup> Some communication theorists, such as Serres (1980), say that a perfect noiseless state would, in fact, result in a state not of perfect communication, but of no communication, since it is the noise that actually creates a difference in the message. If sender and receiver are the same then they basically cancel each other out; it is the noise that creates the environment in which messages take shape. Thus one might say that the secret, in terms of conflict resolution, is not perfect understanding, but objectivity and acceptance of the message.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, psychologist Albert Mehrabian proved in the 1950s that only 7% of human communication lies in what we say; 38% lies in non-verbals such as tone of voice, inflection etc., and a full 55% comes from body language.

<sup>10</sup> see

[www.gov.on.ca/OMAFRA/english/research/new\\_directions/projects/2002/sr9120.htm](http://www.gov.on.ca/OMAFRA/english/research/new_directions/projects/2002/sr9120.htm) for project details.

Other issues where conflict arises in rural areas stem from conflicts between producers and other sectors over limited resources, especially in the world's fisheries. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (1998) *Communicating Protected Areas* has produced a number of working papers dealing with conflict resolution in the fishery (see, for example, Marmulla, 2001). A particularly interesting one in that it deals with conflict in a traditional society, similar to some of the conflicts between indigenous and non-indigenous fishers in Canada, is Ruddle's (1987) discussion of the methods that Japanese coastal fishers use for conflict resolution. He gives examples of not just the personal and community level, but also of the national and international; in Japan, such conflicts are dealt with in a very formal manner through small group discussion, verbal communication and the use of go-betweens, which ensures that the conflict is not allowed to escalate and become entrenched.

Another smaller theme found in this area concentrates on more sociocultural reasons for conflict, such as family violence and school bullying. For instance, Foster, Krenz and Pogoloff's (2000) study of 100 grade fours and fives in a rural multicultural elementary school with a significant problem with student violence report that after the implementation of a preventative conflict resolution training program, incidents of violence decreased, and there was a statistically significant increase in academic attainment, hygiene and positive classroom/playground behaviour. Johnson and Johnson (2003) echo this result in a discussion of the University of Minnesota's Teaching Students to be Peacemakers program. This program is in place in rural schools in the Minnesota school system; it is a 12-year continuous initiative, so students are participants K-12. Over the last 14 years, the authors have conducted 17 studies around this initiative, which show that the program does foster the development of non-violent, caring, socially responsible and conflict-competent children, adolescents and young adults. In fact, many of these students' parents have requested that a version of the program be developed for them for use within the family unit.

Related to this, Viegas & Meek (1998) discuss another program oriented to farm families in crisis. Due to the current farm crisis brought about by the economic restructuring in the agricultural sector (commonly known as the "death of the family farm") stress levels within many farm families are very high. The Extension Department of Iowa State University created the Rural Families Program to respond to this; this program centres around a one-on-one stress prevention intervention, and focuses on conflict resolution within the family, as well as helping families to deal with various types of stress-related mental illness. As the authors note, "Through community capacity building activities the program helped strengthen small rural communities through establishing collaborations....and helped inspire a shared vision of the future through the involvement and commitment of diverse groups of citizens" (p.6). Unfortunately the program was cut when funding dried up. Fetsch & Gebeke (1994) also discuss a number of family related issues, and outline a tool for testing the validity and efficacy of these types of programs.

Another major thrust of the literature in this area is to present methods for resolving conflict. Virtually every one of them revolves around communication capacity building. On a theoretical level, Allen (1998) explores how social capital can actually be developed through an interactional field as a rural community in Nebraska works its way through resolving a crisis. Further, Balestrieri and Soyak

(2005) show how economic development itself can be used as a tool for conflict resolution, especially in the developing world. On a more practical level, Clark (1994) does an excellent job of presenting a conceptual framework for conflict resolution in coastal areas, starting by examining the nature of conflict, and then presenting a framework for resolving it. Owen, Howard and Waldron (2000) discuss the role of interactive conflict resolution (ICR) approaches in resolving conflicts, especially in farmer and neighbour situations. This particular methodology stresses communication, dialogue and structured exercises; the objective of ICR is “not to resolve or settle the conflict, but to get the disputing parties to talk about their interests and differences in the conflict” (p.480). The authors quote Fisher (1997, in Owen et al, 2000, p.480) by noting that “the emphasis is on simply understanding the other party and the conflict as a mutual problem rather than attempting to change the other or resolve the conflict.” Lambarth (2002) describes a process of alternative dispute resolution, or mediation, designed specifically for rural communities. The eight step process incorporates advanced communication, listening and negotiation skills to facilitate problem solving between disputants. The rate of successful dispute resolution in the case study community was over 85%. In a European context, Richardson and Connelly (2002) do a very thorough job of outlining the best practices for consensus building as a basis for conflict resolution in rural development revolving around policy.

Finally, there are a very large number of conflict resolution manuals and training methods available for downloading on the Internet, many of which have been developed by various university extension departments specifically for rural communities. While the list is too long to put down here in detail, it is worth mentioning a few of the particularly useful ones. Mississippi State’s Southern Rural Development Center’s “Turning Lemons Into Lemonade: Public Conflict Resolution” (<http://srdc.msstate.edu/publications/lemons/221.htm>) is one of the best-known train the trainer learning manuals in the US. It has 15 units covering all facets of conflict resolution. It also has an excellent “further resources” section at the end. Although not a training manual per se, Lloyd (2001) walks the reader through the stages of a conflict towards resolution of a case study example. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Department of Human and Community Development has a very thorough list of conflict resolution under its community and economic development webpage ([www.communitydevelopment.uiuc.edu/conflict/resources.cfm](http://www.communitydevelopment.uiuc.edu/conflict/resources.cfm)). Besides a list of books and other sources, they provide links to some of the more popular conflict resolution training sites. Finally, Penn State has developed a program called “Conflict Resolution at the Rural/Urban Interface,” (<http://cax.aers.psu.edu/brochure/newpage9.htm>) which consists of three workshops that look at dealing with rural change, conflict within rural communities, and conflict resolution between farmers and non-farmers. The depth of available literature in this regard highlights the importance that is increasingly being put on building communication capacity in rural development.

### **Conclusions and Clues from the Literature**

Communication is an inherent part of rural capacity building. This should come as no surprise, for, as noted in the beginning of this article, communication could be said to be the basis upon which society in all of its facets is built. But what does this mean in concrete terms to Canadian rural communities caught in the midst of

global economic shifts, those trying to engage and sustain themselves in the new rural economy?

First, there is solid evidence in the literature that many problems, if not arising from, are at least exacerbated by a breakdown of communication. This is perhaps most evident in the increasing incidents of rural/urban conflict in the face of encroaching urbanization into rural areas. In fact, Gillis (2004), discussed above, titles his article "The War between Town and Country," and suggests that this is the ground where Canada's next "culture war" will be fought. Alm and Witt (1997) discuss the potential for urban/rural conflict found in the work of American academic Clive Thomas and environmental policy, by doing a county-by-county analysis of environmental policy, in the face of encroaching urbanization in Idaho. Mellow (2005), in her study of how rurality affects the work of professionals such as medical people, clergy, lawyers, *etc.*, concludes that most conventional standards of professional behaviour reflect an urban bias, and thus many rural professionals are caught up in what she calls "the Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft Gavotte" (p. 50). And even though they take a somewhat more pacific tone, Hindman, Ernst and Richardson (2001) still focus on the apparent absence of resources in the rural area. Their study of the social structural context of community newspaper editors' use of a variety of information technologies found that newspapers in more pluralistic, urban areas were more likely to use a broader range of information technologies than their rural counterparts, with the result that these technologies "are more likely to reinforce than to remove the more fundamental constraints affecting local mass media in small, rural communities" (p.160). While they acknowledge that this may well have to do with lack of access, fewer economic resources, and community structure in the rural environment, they express concern that the result of their findings indicates a growing knowledge gap between urban and rural communities.

Second, we suggest that as the world becomes increasingly urban<sup>11</sup>, there is a heightened need for building capacity in terms of conflict resolution skills. Urbanization is not going to go away; however, it can be managed through negotiation and compromise. It is even possible, in this age of decreasing agricultural production, that through these means, a new concept of rural vitalization may be realized.

Third, hand in hand with this increase in conflict resolution skills is education. By this we mean not just in terms of skills for job development, but an increased awareness of the world outside one's own local area. In a global age, it is possible, and we would argue necessary, to focus on the local in terms of development. However, it is also necessary to understand how developments on a larger scale affect and shape local development. Rural communities need to be able to influence policy at a provincial and federal level in order to stay viable. Organizations such as Nova Scotia's Rural Communities Impacting Policy (RCIP) play an important role in teaching rural communities the skills needed to do so. And so, education on topical issues through such means as the mass media and the internet has become not just a luxury, but an important method of sharing information and strategies.

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<sup>11</sup> In 2004, for the first time in the history of the planet, more people lived in urban environments than in rural.

Fourth, the importance of communication in the building of social capital and social cohesion cannot be overstated. These “ties that bind” are what keep rural communities alive even in the face of economic disaster. By sharing feelings, ideas, motivation, and even conflict, the individuals that make up communities form links with each other. Often, this results in praxis, and is what lies at the heart of Habermas’s concept of communicative action. However, without good communication skills, and a forum for citizens to have their say, praxis, if not impossible to achieve, at least becomes much more difficult.

Attempts at capacity building without some consideration of communication methods, tools and skills cannot in the end succeed. The literature is full of examples, especially in these days of project based funding, where capacity building attempts have failed and money has been wasted because project goals and potential have been “inflicted” in a top down fashion: the communication was all one way, and usually originated from outside the community. But communication that fosters growth is a two-way street, and so ultimately, the most important thing communities can do to build capacity is to engage in multidirectional dialogue with all community stakeholders. Only then does sustainable development have a chance.



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