*J*ournal of *R*ural and *C*ommunity *D*evelopment

"From Policy to Research and Back Again": Experiences From a Rural Research Institute

Author: Greg Halseth, & Laura Ryser

"From Policy to Research and Back Again": Experiences From A Rural Research Institute

Greg Halseth
Geography Program
Community Development Institute
University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada
halseth@unbc.ca

Laura Ryser
Rural and Small Town Studies Program
University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada
ryser@unbc.ca

1.0 Introduction

We are pleased to provide these additional notes and comments as a complement to the paper by Berdegué and Fernández (2012). In many ways, we cannot think of a better introduction for, or background to, our reflections on the experiences of a Canadian rural research institute with policy-makers at the federal, provincial, and local government levels. As background for this contribution to the discussion, universities, and university researchers, are under increasing pressure to mobilize research findings in support of change in both public policy and in public/private sector practice. This pressure has gained considerable momentum in recent decades as part of a discourse on the nature of knowledge creation and the role of academic/research institutions in society (Piper, 2002). In some respects, this discourse echoes with some of the same tensions and issues that marked the older 'applied' research versus 'basic' research debates (or 'applied' versus 'academic' as described by Berdegué and Fernández) that has occurred across the social science disciplines for generations.

One tool now widely used by universities as a way to respond to this pressure has been the creation of subject or topic specific research institutes. The comments shared in this paper reflect the experiences of one such research institute, the Community Development Institute (CDI) at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). The CDI has many years of experience in working with policy decision-makers at all levels to translate and mobilize rural research into action. Following a brief introduction to the CDI, the remainder of this paper is broken down into four sections: 'denial', 'disconnect', 'access', and 'lag'.

2.0 The CDI at UNBC

The CDI at UNBC was created in 2004. It is one of a number of research institutes at the university and its development followed established policies for identifying a mandate, operating and governance mechanisms, and membership procedures. Following this same policy framework, the official sanctioning of the CDI was done by a motion of the University's Senate. As is typical of the cadre of research centres and institutes that have sprung up around university campuses, the CDI gets access to space, use of administrative services, and strong general support

from the university. In terms of operating budgets for research staff and work, however, the CDI operates with 'soft' funding—in other words, it depends on external research grants and contracts for its revenues.

Within its mandate, the CDI is interested in two fundamental issues for communities in northern BC: community capacity and community development. The primary geographic focus upon the still largely resource dependent communities of northern BC aligns with the service area of UNBC – a service area that was itself defined by the strong support people across the region and shown in the campaign that led to the founding of the university (McCaffray, 1995). By undertaking research, sharing information, and supporting education outreach, the CDI is a vital partner to communities interested in making informed decisions about their own futures. As a part of this mandate and mission, an important role of the CDI is to broker relevant relationships by bringing together groups of people and/or agencies that can help to address local needs or issues. Throughout this work, the CDI emphasizes the importance of capacity-building, collaboration, and learning. In addition, it also works to achieve complementarity and synergy wherever possible between UNBC research centres and institutes.

Research projects undertaken through the CDI balance academic credibility with practical relevance. In this sense, the CDI sits comfortably at the crossroads of the 'applied-vs.-basic' research debate. It has been able to meet the research needs of northern BC's communities in support of ongoing social and economic restructuring while at the same time contributing to academic debate about key conceptual, methodological, and definitional matters. Beyond research, the CDI is also involved in extensive outreach activities and serves as a conduit to expand and enhance local educational opportunities related to community development. It is through this outreach mandate that the CDI engages with policy and decision-makers at the federal, provincial, and local government levels. Over the last 8 years, the CDI has built considerable experience with these 'receptor' audiences. The observations and comments shared in this paper reflect these experiences and the lessons we have been able to take from them.

2.1 Denial

Perhaps one of the most challenging initial lessons gained through our experience in working to mobilize research knowledge with policy audiences has been that not all policy-makers will always understand, or be interested in, the importance and meaning of assistive public policy, or of the continued importance and relevance of rural places to the Canadian social and economic dynamic. It has been our experience that while evidence-based policy-making sounds like a sensible and reasonable approach, it is not always the starting point for policy development. While evidence-based policy-making might be the normal or usual approach for developing assistive public policy, those engaged in moving research into the policy arena must be aware that there can be very real political and personal agendas at work at different times. These agendas are a reality of Canadian public policy-making at all levels. While they should not discourage us from a more general participation in the development of policy, they are a difficult reality that must be understood. This experience adds nuance to the observation by Berdegué and Fernández, (2012, see p. 6 in this issue) that the "dialogue and interaction between research and public policy are molded by the political, economic and institutional context".

A second key challenge in delivering policy messages, particularly to the provincial and federal levels, is a lack of understanding by some in these audiences of the continued value of rural communities and rural economies to Canada. Arguments can be posited in support of the rural economic, social, cultural, and demographic condition and contribution, but we have found that many of the policy-makers who have been raised in, and/or work exclusively in, an urban context do not have a well developed understanding of the realities of contemporary rural places and economies. This may be understandable when one considers that the only familiarity they may have with rural and small town places is from news coverage that speaks of economic problems, closures, bailouts, etc. From this perspective, it may not be a surprise that they might have formed negative perceptions and/or stereotypical images of rural places and economies. Again, these are issues that can be worked around, but they should be understood if one is to be serious about engaging with long-term policy sharing from rural research.

Entwined with parts of the above noted aspects of 'denial' are the consequences of a fundamental change in how policy development has proceeded since the early 1980s. Principal amongst this change has been the transition to neo-liberalism and the off-loading (or abandonment) of services and other supports to lower levels of government without maintaining top-down financial and policy supports. This fits with another change in orientation, also since the 1980s, that views policy activities as expenses (something to be evaluated against short-term benefits or repayment) rather than investments (something expected to pay back to the society and economy for years if not decades). These changes combine to create a very difficult environment within which to share rural research into contemporary policy-making arenas.

3.0 Disconnect

As noted above, some of the people encountered in research mobilization to support policy development in senior levels of government are urban-based and may not have experience with rural and small town places. This can create a powerful disconnect with the realities of these communities. Even where public policy decision-makers may be working earnestly to create supportive public policies, the disconnect in understanding the realities of rural and small town lives and economies may mean that resulting policies have the potential to do more harm than good.

A simple example would be the British Columbia experience with bringing in new municipal legislation. The transition from the Municipal Act to the Community Charter was designed to create a more flexible set of tools for local governments to manage their fiscal and development activities. The motivation for the change was due in part to long-term jealousy on the part of municipalities governed under an older Municipal Act that looked at the flexibility which the City of Vancouver had under its own charter. Another was the growing fiscal imbalance between the tasks local governments were being asked or required to do and their limited options for raising local revenues. While intended to assist local governments, the application of this flexibility failed to realize that the same rules, regulations, and reporting structures would apply to the municipality of Burnaby (population 202,799, municipal staff complement of about 3,260) as to the municipality of Mackenzie (population 4,539, municipal staff complement of 14), or Hudson's Hope (population 1,012, municipal staff complement of 8). While Burnaby may be able

to cope with the reporting requirements, and take advantage of the increased flexibility of the Community Charter, smaller places simply do not have the capacity and end up being stressed further by the new reporting requirements. Failure to recognize this fundamental difference in rural and urban local government capacities is an illustration of a disconnect between policy-making and ultimately supportive public policy.

Paying attention to possible areas of disconnect is also important because policy supports may become ineffective if they fail to understand the limitations with accessing services and supports in rural regions. For example, many government forms and supports are now posted on-line, yet, as late as 2005, nearly half (47%) of Canadian communities, mostly rural and small town places, did not have broadband infrastructure (McKeown, Noce, & Czerny, 2007). Access to broadband infrastructure is even more limited in non-metropolitan Aboriginal communities. Policy-makers may also not recognize how large distances can impede access to supports across a rural region, an old and well understood issue in rural and small town service provision (Halseth, Sullivan, & Ryser, 2003). In addition, access to supports in rural regions may be further impacted by weather and climate, limited transportation options, and even the seasonal economic/business cycles linked to individual resource industries.

Rural policy development has also been challenged by a failure to understand the diversity of rural Canada, starting even with how we define rural and small town places. Perceptions and definitions of small localities, however, can have important implications for the design of service delivery policies and programs that are influenced by these understandings (du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2004). Over the past two decades, rural definitions have been constructed not only by population size, but also by proximity to metropolitan centres, the dominant type of land use, density, and demographics (Government of Québec, 2001; Halseth & Sullivan, 2002; Hawkins, 1995; Rambeau & Todd, 2000). In Canada, rural and small town places have generally been defined by Statistics Canada as localities that have less than 10,000 people where less than 50% of the labour force commutes to a CMA/CA and less than 25% commute from a CMA/CA (du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2001, McLaren, 2002). Beyond differing definitions built from population size or distance / isolation, there continues to be limited development of place-based policies that reflect the breadth of rural communities – recognizing that not all rural communities are agricultural or declining, and that new activities and types of rural communities are emerging to take advantage of opportunities in the new rural economy (Bruce, 2010; Che, 2010; Gross and Schmitt, 2003; see also comments on rural economic and community complexity by Berdegué and Fernández, 2012).

It is these forms of disconnect, however, that can create an opportunity for rural research to inform public policy development. Where policy-makers are trying to create a platform for community and economic development or renewal, the CDI has typically found them eager for clarification and assistance in making sure that there is more success and that there are fewer unintended negative consequences from policies and the policy-making process.

4.0 Access

It has been the experience of the CDI that developing access to key policy-making structures and decision-making individuals is an important and long-term process.

We have found that the best approach is to build these relationships slowly. A good way to begin the process is by sharing information, research, and findings in a brief yet coherent manner that is backed up by peer-reviewed publications. The emphasis on 'brief' submissions speaks to the general mode of information sharing at senior government levels, while the importance of backing up with peer-reviewed publications gives the policy review process a level of comfort with the quality of information being supplied. Purposeful outreach in this regard is absolutely vital. First, it builds on the still crucial element of making a human connection and developing inter-organizational relationships based on experience and trust. Second, both researchers and policy-makers are very busy and mechanical efforts such as posting research reports to websites is not an effective way to raise awareness or transmit leading edge information and findings – this can be effective if the policy-makers are already dedicating staff time to Internet searches for such information, but it is not effective if they do not yet know that the topic is one that they should be searching out. As noted by Berdegué and Fernández, (2012, see p. 4 in this issue), it is not just up to policy-makers "to see the light and come forth to be influenced".

As an academic research unit, the CDI has been very careful to maintain political independence and to supply research and policy-making information to all levels of government and, certainly at the provincial level where we have the most contact, to all political parties. This maintenance of an independent and careful critical voice has over time gained the CDI a level of credibility that is very important in being able to influence policy-making. To a degree, we are able to play the role of an honest broker of knowledge, information, and relationships. Today, the CDI finds that there are a wide range of portals through which we can feed our rural research information into the policy-making processes at the local, provincial, and federal levels.

But access is not unidirectional. Research institutes can also play an important role to develop and link researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners by brokering relationships and collaboration. In 2008, for example, the CDI worked with the Omineca Beetle Action Coalition and Timberline Natural Resource Group to develop a Future Forest Products and Fibre Use Forum. The Forum brought together key stakeholders such as community and Aboriginal leaders, senior government officials, industry leaders, and other experts. Despite the presentation and delivery of research and other relevant information, Forum participants felt that research recommendations will not be taken seriously unless rural voices are collectively brought together to support and posit such solutions to senior levels of government (Community Development Institute, 2009).

Another example comes from Mackenzie BC, a forestry dependent community of 4,500 people two hours north of Prince George in the north central part of the province. In 2007, Mackenzie was hit with a series of 'indefinite closure' announcements that idled all of the sawmills and pulp/paper mills in the community. This created a significant crisis. The day after the first of these announcements, the District of Mackenzie staff met the CDI at UNBC to create a strategic framework for moving forward (Halseth, Killam, & Manson, 2008a, 2008b). One week later, through its role in brokering relationships between policy groups, governmental agencies, and communities, the CDI hosted a meeting of local/regional agencies to develop short-term, medium-term, and long-term response strategies. Participants were able to identify themselves as contact points for the different organizations and

agreed to look into specific projects and initiatives. Participants included local government (District of Mackenzie, Regional District of Fraser-Fort George), First Nations (McLeod Lake Indian Band, Prince George Aboriginal Business Development Corporation), Provincial Government (Mackenzie Forest District, Ministry of Economic Development, Ministry of Community Services) , Federal Government (Industry Canada - Western Economic Diversification), service providers (Northern Health Authority, Service Canada), education (School District, College of New Caledonia, UNBC), regional development organizations (Omineca Beetle Action Coalition, Highways 16-97 Economic Alliance, The Northern Development InitiativeTrust), and community/economic development organizations (Community Futures offices). The lasting impact of this event has been a large set of key policy and operational changes on the part of participating agencies that have helped as they responded to the needs of other communities through the global economic recession that started in late 2008.

5.0 Lag

The last point we wish to highlight is important for it can raise a great deal of frustration on the part of those working hard to influence public policy through sharing their research knowledge. It is important to recognize that the opportunity for policy change and the timing of rural research availability may not always coincide. There can, in fact, be a great deal of lag between the time in which rural research information is provided to the policy-making world and the opportunities that the policy-making world has to take up change.

A second important piece in the relationship between research and policy-making is the need to recognize that a wide array of different pressures are brought to bear at any given point of time on the policy-making world. There are many voices in the debate and one can never be sure as a rural researcher how much your voice is contributing to that debate or to change. At the CDI, it is our hope that when policy changes seem to reflect findings from our work that we have had a small influence in tipping what must have otherwise been a significant body of effort inside the policy-making apparatus to move that issue forward.

To illustrate the issue of lag, we want to highlight a project conducted in the first years of the CDI, the Northern Economic Vision and Strategy Project (Halseth, Manson, Markey, Lax, & Buttar, 2007). The Project went from 2001 to 2004. When completed, we came out with several key recommendations. Among these were:

- Complete the power grid across northern BC,
- Create functional working relationships between the Provincial Government and Aboriginal groups,
- Create a northern economic forum body, and
- Enhance and expand resource revenue sharing arrangements to ensure that more of the revenue generated in the north, stays in the north.

When the report was first released, the CDI received some heavy criticism from within the provincial government. We were quite taken aback by this given that the findings were robust and came from an extensive (3 year long) process of involvement and consultation with groups and organizations (including many provincial government ministries and agencies) active in northern BC. Six years later, however, we find that a great deal has changed on those areas of recommendations.

By 2011, we find that:

▪ The recognition that northern BC needs to have a completed power grid is now a key provincial priority. There has been a great deal of activity in expanding independent power producers, moving forward with plans on the new Peace River hydro-electric project, and extending power lines at least part way up Highway 37 in northeastern BC. In addition, BC Hydro has made it a priority to notify the entire province of our precarious energy circumstances as part of a more general undertaking on its part to expand power generation, enhance power conservation, and begin renewal of its own infrastructure.

▪ In terms of the relationship between the provincial government and Aboriginal groups, since 2005, the BC Government and BC's First Nations leadership have worked to create a more effective framework for interaction. The BC First Nations Summit, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the BC Assembly of First Nations, and the BC Provincial Government have all endorsed the 'New Relationship' document 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).

▪ In terms of the northern economic forum body, a key activity has been the Provincial Government's creation in 2004 of the Northern Development Initiative Trust. This Trust covers much of northern BC and is organized primarily around the assets from the long-term lease of BC Rail to CN. In addition, the provincial government has supported the creation of three 'beetle action coalitions' (regional coalitions of local governments and sector representatives) charged with creating regional economic development strategies to cope with the economic and community implications of the mountain pine beetle epidemic in the province's forests. The provincial government has also supported the creation of a number of economic alliances – informal bodies of economic development practitioners working together to create synergies at a regional scale.

▪ The provincial government has also extended significantly the number of resource revenue sharing arrangements that it has with communities. This has included an expansion of the community forest program and expansion of the timber and range agreements for northern First Nations.

For us, this story illustrates that lag is an important piece in the policy development process and that researchers feeding into that process must not be discouraged if results do not seem to come in the short-term (see also comments by Berdegué and Fernández (2012, see p. 18 in this issue) about "influencing the policy process"). This question of time and timing is important in any evaluation of 'success' in research-policy knowledge mobilization activity.

6.0 Conclusion

In the opening to this paper we noted that both universities and university researchers are under increasing pressure to mobilize research findings into a variety of action arenas so as to support change in both policy and practice. One of the tools now widely used by universities to respond to this pressure involves stand alone research institutes. These institutes have proven to be a flexible and responsive tool that can be created and modified in response to external pressures much more easily than the rather arcane academic structures of departments,

colleges, faculties, etc. Drawing on the experiences gained through work by UNBC's Community Development Institute, this paper has reflected on some lessons that may assist other research units in their knowledge mobilization activities with policy making at a range of governmental levels. In particular, we focused on the issues of 'denial', 'disconnect', 'access', and 'lag'. We hope that by sharing some of our experiences we have added nuance and possibility to Berdegué and Fernández's comment that "the arena of policy-research engagement is a messy and complex one" (2012, see p. 17 in this issue).

Capacity and context matter if policy and program supports are to be effective in rural and small town places. By linking with policy-makers, rural research institutes can ensure that emerging knowledge is brought to action as soon as possible; and by linking with rural research institutes, policy-makers can enhance their awareness and understanding of issues that may limit policy or program effectiveness early in the development process and make adjustments.

7.0 References

Berdegué, J. A. & Fernández, M. I. (2012). From policy to research and back again: Rimisp-Latin American Center for Rural Development. *Journal of Rural and Community Development 7*(3), 4-25.

Bruce, D. (2010). Nurturing the animation sector in a peripheral economic region: The case of Miramichi, New Brunswick. In G. Halseth, S. Markey, & D. Bruce (Eds.), *The next rural economies: Constructing rural place in a global economy* (pp. 128-141). Oxfordshire, UK: CABI International Publishing.

Che, D. (2010). Value-added and entertainment agricultural products in Michigan's fruit belt. In G. Halseth, S. Markey, & D. Bruce (Eds.), *The next rural economies: Constructing rural place in a global economy* (pp. 102-114). Oxfordshire, UK: CABI International Publishing.

Community Development Institute. (2009). *Omineca Beetle Action Coalition's Future Forest Summit, September 19th, 2008: Final report*. Prepared for the Omineca Beetle Action Coalition and Timberline Nature Resource Group. Available on-line at: http://www.unbc.ca/assets/cdi/cdi_obac_future_forest_summit_final_report__jan_2009_.pdf

Du Plessis, V., Beshiri, R., Bollman, R., & Clemenson, H. (2001). Definitions of rural. *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin*, *3*(3), 1-17. Catalogue no. 21-006-XIE.

Du Plessis, V., Beshiri, R., Bollman, R., & Clemenson, H. (2004). Definitions of rural. In G. Halseth & R. Halseth (Eds.), *Building for success: Exploration of rural community and rural development* (pp. 51-79). Brandon, Manitoba: Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

First Nations Summit. (2005). *Backgrounder – "new relationship": Implementation of Supreme Court of Canada decisions.*,Retrieved September 20, 2005 from http://www.fns.bc.ca/info/newrelationship.htm

Gouvernement du Québec. (2001). *Politique nationale de la ruralité*.

Gross, D., & Schmitt, N. (2003). The role of cultural clustering in attracting new immigrants. *Journal of Regional Science*, *43*(2), 295-318.

Halseth, G., Killam, S., & Manson, D. (2008a). Working framework for economic emergencies for smaller municipalities- Part I. *Municipal World*, *118*(3), 35-39.

Halseth, G., Killam, S., & Manson, D. (2008b). Working framework for economic emergencies for smaller municipalities- Part II. *Municipal World*, *118*(4), 35-38.

Halseth, G., Manson, D., Markey, S., Lax, L., & Buttar, O. (2007). The connected north: Findings from the Northern B.C. Economic Vision and Strategy Project. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, *2*(1), 1-27.

Halseth, G., & Sullivan, L. (2002). *Building community in an instant town: A social geography of Mackenzie and Tumbler Ridge, B.C.* Prince George, British Columbia: University of Northern British Columbia Press.

Halseth, G., Sullivan, L., & Ryser, L. (2003). Service provision as part of resource town transition planning: A case from northern British Columbia. In D. Bruce & G. Lister (Eds.), *Opportunities and actions in the new rural economy* (pp. 19-46). Sackville, New Brunswick: Rural and Small Town Programme.

Hawkins, L. (1995). *Mapping the diversity of rural economies: A preliminary typology of rural Canada*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

McCaffray, C. J. (1995). *UNBC, a northern crusade: The how and who of B.C.'s northern U*. Duncan, British Columbia: C.J. McCaffray.

McKeown, L., Noce, A., & Czerny, P. (2007). Factors associated with Internet use: Does rurality matter? *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin*, *7*(3), 1-15. Catalogue no. 21-006-XIE.

McLaren, L. (2002). Information and communication technologies in rural Canada. *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin*, *3*(5), 1-26. Catalogue no. 21-006-XIE.

Piper, M. (2002) *Building a civil society: A new role for the human sciences*. Killam Annual Lecture. Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Killam Trusts.

Rambeau, S., & Todd, K. (2000). *Census metropolitan areas and census agglomeration influenced zones (MIZ) with census data*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.