The (Dis?)Connected North: Persistent Regionalism in Northern British Columbia

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In recent years, northern British Columbia (BC) has experienced rapid changes in the stability and composition of its economy. The region is responding to multiple pressures, such as the softwood lumber dispute, the mountain pine beetle epidemic, and shifting directions in provincial policy. These pressures are affecting BC during a time of economic resource restructuring. But at the same time, northern BC is experiencing booms in mining and oil and gas sectors, and is buoyed by a sense of comparative, if temporary, intra-provincial regional equity not seen since the 1980s (Finlayson 2005).

This paper is the result of ongoing research, started in 2003, to address community and regional development issues in northern BC. Our starting point, the
Northern BC Economic Development Vision and Strategy Project, was designed to find out what ideas northerners themselves had for improving economic development opportunities where they live. In general terms, we organized the project to answer a simple 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?

Too often governments have imposed processes or plans on the region, and for too long, people in northern BC participated in those processes only to have key recommendations or outcomes changed or rejected. This legacy has created a good deal of skepticism about economic planning processes, and reinforced a view that the region and its communities are essentially on their own. In contrast, current economic challenges and opportunities 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.

Drawing from the Project, the purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to understand why despite stated frustrations with past regional development efforts, regional approaches to development emerged as a strong theme from the research; and second, to provide a synthesis of guiding principles for future regional development work in northern BC which may then inform other jurisdictions. A third, and more literature-oriented purpose, is to respond to a general critique of new regionalism: that it is too abstract and lacking in bottom-up representation (Lovering 1999; Barnes et al 2000).

In the following section, we provide a brief overview of the Project’s process as well as the socio-economic context for northern BC. Following that, we provide a history of regional development initiatives in BC, outline a variety of new motivations for regionalism across northern BC, and review regional development options from other places. Finally, we present a number of principles for regional development, drawn from northerners themselves, to guide future regionalist efforts.

Project Process and Context

Our research has gone to extensive lengths (and distances) to reveal the views and aspirations of northerners. We traveled throughout northern BC, which for the purposes of the research we defined as everything from 100 Mile House north to the Yukon, and from the Alberta border to the Pacific Ocean (Figure 1). There were three rounds of interaction with northern residents. In the first round, undertaken between September and November 2003, our team traveled to communities around northern BC to speak with individuals and groups. In the second round, from February to March 2004, a series of workshops and roundtable events were held in a number of northern communities to review, refine, and supplement the topics and ideas raised through the interviews and to develop recommendations for an economic development framework. The final round of community visits were
conducted between May and June 2004 to ‘ground truth’ the draft Final Report.

We designed the process (with the assistance and direction of a project advisory committee with strong northern representation) to look at how a community-based approach could identify what people in northern BC consider to be important about renewing their economic foundations – and what sort of local or regional infrastructure and processes might support that renewal. We asked people about existing and potential mechanisms for working together, and they provided a range of suggestions that we have captured in this paper. In order to expand our understanding of different potential models, the project team also looked at models of regional development coordination across Canada and internationally. These examples provided comparative insights and linkages that could be used to ground some of the workshop/roundtable discussions.

In conducting the key informant interviews, the research team traveled over 14,000 km and visited 51 communities and villages. In concert with the Project’s community-based approach, the identification of key informants focused upon
local government, industry, labour, small business, First Nations, economic development organizations, community groups, social development groups, and also people who self-identified themselves in response to Project publicity. During the interviews, a standard set of questions were asked and participants were free to provide any additional comments they might wish. Many people also supplied background information and materials on economic development processes or projects with which they had previously worked. The interviews covered four general topic areas. The first concerned characteristics of a northern lifestyle, and how those characteristics may be important for 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 project team compiled a summary of the key informant interview findings and distributed a draft copy to all respondents for review and comment. The revised Community Interviews Summary Report became one of the inputs to the regional workshop and roundtable process.

The key informant interviews confirmed that residents of northern British Columbia were keenly interested in pursuing the idea of an integrated vision and strategy for economic development in the region. 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. This provided the foundation for a series of nine regional workshops and roundtables which explored various aspects of northern development (Table 1). During the initial project design, it was anticipated that only 4 regional workshops would be held. The key informant interviews, however, revealed that more people wanted to be involved than could reach these workshops. In response, the project added a fifth workshop in Houston and developed a series of smaller roundtable events across northern BC. The regional workshops were facilitated sessions while the roundtables were smaller discussion processes with the project team. Recruitment for the workshops and roundtables involved the assistance of many community and economic development stakeholder groups. These included chambers of commerce, Community Futures offices, local economic development offices, band, regional, and municipal governments, local and regional business and industry associations, social services groups, as well as suggestions from the key informants and the project advisory committee.

The team structured these workshop and roundtable events around three key questions:

• What are the significant themes you would identify as being an integral part of your vision for northern British Columbia?
• What are some of the key strategic directions that you think are important for northern British Columbia?
• What framework or model would best suit implementation of a northern British Columbia economic vision and strategy?
TABLE 1 Workshops and Roundtables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Workshop / Roundtable</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>38021</td>
<td>Prince George</td>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 - 19 February 2004</td>
<td>Queen Charlotte Islands</td>
<td>Roundtables - 2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38042</td>
<td>Terrace</td>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38044</td>
<td>Dease Lake</td>
<td>Roundtable</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38050</td>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38057</td>
<td>Williams Lake</td>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38064</td>
<td>Dawson Creek</td>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38077</td>
<td>Prince Rupert</td>
<td>Roundtable</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We provided workshop participants with an overview of the project, a summary of the community interview findings, and material on regional economic development models that had been compiled by the project team. Each working session was preceded by a brief discussion of what the team had heard previously, and participants discussed the questions in small groups to allow for maximum input.

Overall, about 200 northerners participated directly in the workshops and roundtables. Summaries of each workshop and roundtable were drafted within 10 days of each event, and participants were afforded the opportunity to provide comment and feedback on the draft summaries. Once the draft summaries were reviewed by participants, a final report was then completed and circulated. Since some individuals invited to the workshops were not able to participate, the project team circulated the finalized workshop summaries to these individuals as well.

To ensure that northerners who wished to engage with the process had the opportunity to provide input, the project team circulated draft copies of the Final Report to all those who had been contacted through the project. This included interview respondents and workshop participants as well as those who had been initially contacted for community interviews or invited to the workshops and roundtables but were unable to participate. The draft and final versions of the Final Report were also mounted on the project website for wider access (and included an on-line comment/response form). In addition, the Project team undertook a last round of community visits after circulating the draft Final Report to hear from participants about how the end result resonated with their input and perspectives.

In conducting community-based research, it becomes clearly apparent that Northern BC is economically, culturally, and environmentally diverse. As a result, we must be careful when generalizing about “The North.” For example, to the east and north, the region traverses the Rocky Mountains and interior plateau of the Peace River to the coastal rainforests of the Mid-Coast in the west. To the south, we find the gold rush trail of the Cariboo Regional District. The region as a whole is home to sixteen different Tribal Councils and seventy-seven First Nations Bands. As a contiguous region, then, northern BC represents divergent geograph-
ical and cultural settings. Nevertheless, the following profile synthesizes numerous reports that document basic trends in rural and northern BC to help build a portrait for the consideration of regional development strategies. These trends suggest a good deal of commonality across the region.

Northern BC comprises about 70% of the provincial land mass and contains approximately 10% of the provincial population. The economy of northern BC is similar to other northern economies, being heavily dependent on forestry, mining, power-generation, and tourism. There is also a robust second economy of hunting, fishing, and trapping. Structural economic change has been slow across northern BC. A recent study by Nelson and MacKinnon (2004) notes that while some other regions in non-metropolitan BC may be diversifying away from a staples based economy, northern BC remains dependent upon ‘traditional staples’.

Nevertheless, northern BC is endowed with a variety of economic advantages (Ference Weiker 2003; BC Progress Board 2002; Hutton 2002):

1. The northern regions of BC are attractive to people and investment:
   - Affordability (e.g. land and housing)
   - Quality of life factors (small town, natural environment)
   - Demand for amenities (e.g. burgeoning retirement and tourism opportunities)

2. The northern regions of BC are resource rich:
   - Resource wealth for extraction and processing
   - Share of export wealth: non-metropolitan regions of BC are responsible for 71% of the export wealth generated in BC (Baxter and Ramlo 2002)
   - Tourism opportunities/amenities

3. The northern regions of BC display strong social characteristics:
   - Commitment to place exhibited by northerners
   - Aboriginal rights
   - Sizeable Aboriginal youth population

Despite these many advantages, when compared with the rest of the province, northern BC faces competitive challenges by virtue of pockets of social and economic trends, including:

- Higher dependency on primary industries (less economic diversity),
- Higher levels of unemployment, 
- Lower levels of education, and
- Fewer and less access to services.

These trends vary in magnitude; however, as a generalization, socio-economic performance tends to decrease as the distance from metropolitan areas increases.
Hutton (2002) warns that uneven patterns of development are increasing across the province, leading to disparities and the potential for political and social alienation. For example, socio-economic trends are particularly low in Aboriginal communities. In addition, as Hutton (2002) states, uneven patterns of development are increasing across the province, leading to disparities and the potential for political and social alienation.

In addition to these characteristics, economic development strategies in northern BC must address and overcome a variety of competitive disadvantages (Hanlon and Halseth 2005; Ference Weiker 2003; Lax et al 2001) including:

- Employment in primary industries is declining,
- Smaller businesses are more geographically dispersed,
- The population base is declining; youth out-migration is taking place,
- Resource frontier aging is occurring,
- Information and IT access is more limited than in urban centres,
- Access to investment capital is a challenge,
- Geographic isolation increases transaction costs,
- Revitalization of downtown business sectors is needed, and
- Access to education is improving but still uneven.

In an effort to capitalize on the above northern strengths, and to overcome rural competitive disadvantage, BC has, over the years, attempted to implement various regional development programs and structures.

Regional Development Strategies in BC

There is a long history of provincially oriented regional development experience in BC. Starting in the 1950s, the W.A.C. Bennett government instigated a variety of policies with the intention of ‘opening the north’ (Williston and Keller 1997; Larson 2004). These policies, including hydro and rail development, were aimed at transforming a sporadically settled hinterland into a more integrated economic and political landscape (Tomblin 1990). The initiatives (and the Fordist compromise between industry, government, and labour) helped to facilitate a period known as the 'long boom' in BC, characterized by net continued expansion and growth throughout the province (Hayter 2000).

Concerted policies dealing with regional development then resurfacd more prominently in the 1980s, corresponding with the recession in the early years of that decade. The recession marked a pivotal moment in the industrial restructuring of the province and a period of considerable employment loss and dislocation throughout hinterland BC (Hayter and Barnes 1997; Hayter 2004). Munro (2004: 453) suggests that such a shift, or period of change, was somewhat inevitable given that “further expansion in resource extraction became impossible, world markets...
began to be served by competing suppliers, and questioning of the environmental and the social consequences of continued rapid economic growth became more intense”. As described by Halseth et al (2004), the impacts of the shifts and changes in northern BC have included economic volatility, population declines (with locales of ‘boom economies’), out-migration of working age families, and accelerated population aging. Regionalist efforts since that time have, to some extent, been struggling to replace the relative stability of the long-boom, but within a much more fractured and complex economic, social, and environmental rural setting. Table 2 provides a brief summary of key regional initiatives dating from the 1950s to the present.

Our review of the various regional initiatives in BC reveals three broad limitations. First, Table 2 illustrates the contrast between the sporadic three to five year policy horizons of most governments with the long-term process of community and regional development (Douglas 2003; Markey et al 2005). This inconsistency represents a critical challenge for regional development across northern BC. The relatively sustained regional expansion and infrastructure policies of the W.A.C. Bennett government from the 1950s to the early 1970s are an exception, and a source of considerable nostalgia, for hinterland regions in BC (de Wolf 2002). Second, the initiatives are cited for their lack of meaningful bottom-up direction and control (Edgington 2004). And third, at a strategic level, the regional development organizations attempted to generate economic activity by virtue of their place (either for industry attraction or tourism) but they did not control any of the local and regional resources. This combination means that regional and community development groups faced the most challenging aspects of an uncompetitive environment on their own, while not inheriting any access to the real economic advantages of the area.

One modification to the challenge of meaningful local control is the interest of the current provincial government in ‘regional trusts’. Building from the success of the Columbia Basin Trust (curiously, a 1990s product of the W.A.C. Bennett government’s power sales agreement with the United States), these now include the Northern Development Initiative and at least two regional Beetle Action Coalitions. The government diverts funds into these trusts from resource revenues and they are managed by a regional body (e.g. committees of mayors and others).

Despite the many frustrations exhibited by northerners towards past and present development initiatives, our research revealed that their willingness to entertain regional development strategies remains strong. The following section outlines a variety of forces that are motivating northern regionalism.
### TABLE 2 BC Regional Development Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950s-1970s</td>
<td>Province Building: Roads to Resources</td>
<td>Province building: economic expansion, infrastructure and access to resources; Re-organization of the provincial ministries and their mandates; Built upon work of the Post-War Reconstruction Committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-1992</td>
<td>Ministers of State and Regional Development Officers (RDO)</td>
<td>Regional districts established and assigned a Minister of State; Regional offices opened in eight regions, consisting of regional development officer (RDO), regional development liaison officer (RDLO) and clerical staff; Mandate to establish regional priorities, implement government programs, and conduct evaluations and reporting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-1996</td>
<td>Regional Economic Development Offices</td>
<td>Five regional offices established with Regional Economic Development Officers (REDOs); REDOs responsible for a more community-based approach towards economic development and implementation of government programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-2001</td>
<td>Northern Development Commission (NDC)</td>
<td>NDC Established by the Northern Development Act and headed by a Commissioner supported by five staff servicing three northern regions; NDC mandate for advocacy and consultation with small fund available to assist development projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2001</td>
<td>Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives, and Volunteers</td>
<td>Variety of community economic development programs and transition funds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000+</td>
<td>Northern Caucus Community Charter Heartland’s Strategy Northern Development Initiative</td>
<td>Macro environment: tax reductions, deregulation, labour flexibility; Tourism (especially the 2010 Olympics); Transportation; First Nations support; Sector marketing and support; Northern Development Initiative Trust.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Lax et al (2001)

### New Motivations for Regional Development
in Northern BC

Our community-based research discussions revealed a variety of external and internal drivers that are promoting regional cooperation across northern BC. These include lessons from new regionalism, the regionalist efforts of competitors, a shared policy experience, and intrinsic forces of connectivity between northerners and northern communities. Each of these forces represent foundations upon which to construct the mechanisms of regional development.

Lessons from New Regionalism

The new regionalist literature itself appears to have reached a sort of 'tipping point' in terms of its saturation level within economic development circles. Two specific concepts appear repeatedly within our northern research.

First, northerners are drawn to the general idea that economic development in northern BC is very much a socially embedded process. Northerners recognize that their strong social bonds — which are historically embedded into the northern culture by virtue of a more rugged and remote existence that demands greater levels of cooperation — play an important role in the northern economy. In other words, the social and the economic are intimately linked in northern British Columbia. These local characterizations of the northern economy easily relate to concepts within the new regionalist literature such as the ‘associational economy’, the role of social capital in development, and regional ‘relational assets’ (MacLeod 2001; Scott 1998; Cook and Morgan 1998; Storper 1997, 1999). All of these concepts speak to a transformed understanding of competitive advantage that is shifting traditional concepts of comparative advantage that once drove the original economic forays into northern BC. Northerners know that they need to work together.

Second, the construction of economic clusters is a strong theme within the research findings. Numerous government-sponsored reports have advocated for cluster development in the ‘250 region’ (250 being the telephone area code for all but the Greater Vancouver region of BC) (BC Progress Board 2002; Ference Weiker 2003). As noted by Edgington (2004: 311), these reports argue “for more effective deployment of a full range of regional resources and attributes, including human, social, cultural and infrastructure capital”. While the cluster concept appears to be gaining broad appeal, its application in the rural context is poorly reflected in the literature. General awareness of the cluster concept throughout northern BC may be due in part to local familiarity with previous growth pole approaches, or simply recognition of the latest economic development fad (Savoie 1997).

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1. Christensen et al (2002: 4), define clusters as: geographic concentrations of an array of linked, competitive firms that either have close buy-sell relationships, utilize common technologies, share customers, and/or share a labour pool that provides them with a competitive advantage.
People told the Project that BC must re-bundle northern BC’s strengths into innovative clusters. They also told us that simply thinking of economic clusters only in terms of natural resource processing strengths (such as was common in the 1960s and 1970s Canadian regional development efforts around growth poles) will not suffice for the renewal of the region’s economy. Instead, they argued for innovation to match the needs and opportunities of the fast paced information economy.

Nevertheless, the cluster concept does motivate different forms of regional cooperation that can be facilitated through regional development structures (see also Porter 2000). In this sense, clusters also signal a compromise between the sector-based policies of the past towards a more territorial approach (Pezzini 2001).

**Context and Competition**

Northern BC is set within a global economy. While this is nothing new for people in the region, what is new is a recognition that the pace of change has been accelerating. In response to processes of social, political, and economic restructuring, many other places and regions are looking to various strategies for rural and northern renewal. Other jurisdictions, from Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario, to Alaska and Norway (in fact all of the European Union) are taking steps to respond to the impacts of global forces on more remote places.

The jurisdictional race to adopt regional development strategies is based upon a perceived need to move beyond an economy driven by comparative advantage, to a more proactive strategy of improving regional competitive advantage (Hutton 2002; Munro 2004). The switch from comparative to competitive advantage implies a significant shift in policy direction, as governments, businesses, and communities move from a reliance on ‘what’s already there’ to the active creation of competitive dynamics, using (or importing) different forms of capital, such as human, infrastructure, and cultural.

Kitson et al (2004) remind us that despite the fact that our understanding of regional competitiveness remains complex and contentious, policy makers in many jurisdictions have jumped on board. They state that regional policy has raced ahead of our understanding and empirical analysis, signaling a point of similarity with assessments of previous regional development policy in Canada (Higgins and Savoie 1995; Savoie 1992).

Nevertheless, the increasing mobility of capital and open markets (or closed markets in the case of softwood lumber) is driving the conceptual shift in favour

**TABLE 3 Northern Development Initiatives, Select Canadian and International Examples**

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2. A growth pole describes a process of establishing industrial activity within a specific centre of a slow-growth region in order to spur economic ‘spread effects’ throughout the rest of the region (Hodge and Robinson 2001).
Location | Northern Initiatives
--- | ---
Alberta | Northern Alberta Development Council
Saskatchewan | Office of Northern Affairs
The Northern Saskatchewan Strategy
Canada-Saskatchewan Development Agreement
Ontario | The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund
Regional Economic Development Branch (Ministry of Northern Development and Mines)
Northern Prosperity Plan (Ministry of Northern Development and Mines)
Alaska | Alaska Regional Development Organization program (ARDORs)
UK | Regional Development Agencies (RDAs)
European Union | Northern Periphery Program

Note: 1. The European Union has a variety of regional development programs; the Northern Periphery Program is highlighted here because it specifically targets northern regions in the UK, Norway, Sweden, The Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland.

of competitiveness (Turok 2004). As a result, the survey of other jurisdictions mentioned at the start of this section reveals a complex array of regional development organizations and policies aimed at northern regions (see Table 3 for a summary).

The Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) provides a useful point of comparison for BC, given proximity to BC and inter-provincial competitiveness. Like northern BC, northern Alberta comprises 60% of Alberta’s landmass, 10% of its population, and has a similar mix of competitive advantages and disadvantages including rich resources, pockets of limited capacity, and distance from urban centres. The Alberta government established the NADC in 1963 through the Northern Alberta Development Council Act, with a mandate to “investigate, monitor, evaluate, plan and promote practical measures to foster and advance general development in northern Alberta” (NADC 2005).

The NADC has a ten-member council and a staff of fifteen. Their budget in 2002-2003 was $1,954,000, with which they engage in a variety of activities to promote the north, build local and regional capacity, manage special programs, liaise with northerners and policy makers, and monitor socio-economic and resource conditions.

Other examples, such as the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines in Ontario, illustrate a more direct and substantial provincial government role in directing and facilitating northern affairs. The Ministry is the only regional ministry within the Ontario government and plays an active role in infrastructure, economic development, and policy coordination across the north.

A comparison with BC’s immediate and more distant competitors highlights that northern BC is behind in terms of its regional ability to promote competitive-
ness. The variability of previous regionalist initiatives in BC also compares poorly with other jurisdictions that have managed to sustain or evolve different regional programs. The only advantage associated with being behind is that BC is able to learn from other jurisdictions and adapt successful approaches.

Changes to Government Policy

The sporadic regionalist approaches witnessed in BC throughout the 1980s and 1990s are to a certain extent emblematic of a more profound shift in government policy from equity-based approaches to less defined attempts at enabling regional and community development (Polèse 1999). While this shift is partly driven by demands for bottom-up representation and control, a negative interpretation of enabling strategies is that they serve as cover for government abandonment (MacKinnon 2002; Lee 2003). Polèse (1999: 309) summarizes the trend with regards to local development:

“The author cannot help but feel that 'local development,' as a policy ideal, is in the end closer to a silent surrender, an implicit admission that the central state really cannot do much about unequal development and regional disparities.”

Certainly, as Savoie (1992, 1997) and others have shown, the federal and provincial government track record with the comprehensive equity model is poor. However, as Markey et al (2005) illustrate, community and regional development models continue to require government initiative, expertise, and resources. Our research in northern BC informs us that communities increasingly feel like they are ‘on their own’. The right balance of contextually appropriate top-down direction and bottom-up initiative remains largely elusive.

Despite the added uncertainties contributed by shifting policy prescriptions, a positive spin-off we discovered is that the shared policy experience between communities and across sub-regions in northern BC is a source of regional connection. Collective frustration creates unification against a larger ‘foe’ that has, in certain circumstances, allowed local differences and disagreements to be placed in a larger perspective.

Connectivity

In addition to a shared policy experience, there are a variety of other inherent forces of connectivity that serve to unite an otherwise geographically, economically, and culturally diverse region. BC is not often associated with being a collaborative environment across different sectors and political interests (Patchell 1996). However, differences may dissipate within a region. Throughout northern BC, people talked about a wide range of factors that connect the region. These include:
• Political relationships/impacts within provincial government policy, and organizations such as the North Central Municipal Association,
• Economic flows between resource production sites and processing centres, as well as between production centres and shipping points that, among other examples, bind the region together,
• Infrastructure that connects diverse places across the region,
• Services that have been consolidated into larger communities creating more connections,
• New factors such as attention to lifestyle and the environment that connect the north via watersheds and valleys, and ground a great deal of northern economic opportunities,
• That population and economic change over the past decade has meant population declines across much of the region,
• That monitoring groups such as the BC Progress Board continue to identify northern BC as a lagging region despite its generation of resource wealth for the province, and
• That the density of settlements and population shifts dramatically once one moves north of 100 Mile House.

Given that regional and rural development strategies must increasingly rely on a critical mass of people, businesses, and governments working together, the above sources of connectivity serve the regional development cause (McDaniel 2003). In fact, this was perhaps the greatest contribution of the Northern BC Economic Development Vision and Strategy Project. We approached the project with great sensitivity toward the differences of northern BC, only to find people and organizations in different areas who highlighted similar trends. If northern BC is to catch-up to other jurisdictions in terms of its regional organization, these connections represent a significant source of strategic advantage.

Principles for Regional Development in Northern BC

The consideration of models for implementing and promoting regional development sets up an interesting dilemma. Based upon historical evidence in BC, it is not difficult to imagine that there will be resistance to virtually any type of organizational structure. That said, within the range of models we reviewed across Canada and internationally (including those presented above), we identified at least four general approaches to implementing regional development. These include:

• A provincial ministry approach, such as the Ontario Ministry of Northern Mines and Development,
A provincial commission/development agency approach, such as the Northern Alberta Development Council or the Alaska Regional Development Organization Program,

• An integrated federal approach, such as fednor (Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario) or the Sustainable Regions Program of Australia, and

• A combined federal-provincial model, such as the Canada-Saskatchewan Northern Development Agreement.

Each of these approaches has merits and cautions, and each has been developed and adapted to address the particular circumstances of individual regions. From this range of models, however, we can extrapolate a number of key themes and lessons. These include:

• The importance of a vision to guide directions,
• The need for clear goals,
• The need for a clear mandate and management structure,
• The need for strong linkages at the local and regional level, and
• The need to adopt a long term approach.

Regardless of the model selected, no single template will be capable of facilitating development in every region of the province (Savoie 1997). As a result, the research team sought to complement (and step back from) specific discussions of structure and ask what principles would best ensure the appropriateness and efficacy of a regional development institution in the north.

In discussions about the options and possibilities for regional development models in northern BC, people spoke about establishing a bottom-up mechanism to coordinate strategic economic development investment discussions with financial resources to implement decisions. Within this type of suggestion, people also spoke about the need to incorporate specific roles for the federal and provincial governments and the private sector. They considered all of these players to be integral parts of the region’s development structure and future.

Regardless of the specific model selected to facilitate regional connectivity, discussion with participants in the community interviews, workshops, and meetings raised and debated the ideas and elements that people felt should guide a regional forum. From this wide-ranging dialogue, seven key principles emerged to guide regional development in northern BC (Table 4).
TABLE 4 Guiding Principles for Regional Development in Northern BC

Institutional Stability
Inclusive Representation
Responsive Governance
Clear Roles and Responsibilities
Independent Funding
Northern Location

Institutional Stability

Given the time and capacity building that economic development requires, participants identified that institutional stability is very important for any northern BC development body or forum. This includes a sense of permanence, security, and longevity such that the model is robust enough to survive economic cycles and government change. Time, people pointed out, was one of the key lessons from success in other jurisdictions.

Inclusive Representation

The people and groups who spoke to us were adamant that membership in any northern BC regional development model must be inclusive and have an equal contribution from local governments and First Nations’ governments. They argued that regional development needs to be a forum that includes all of the voices of northern BC. Additionally, further discussion about model options should consider the need to involve representation from at least four sub-regional advisory bodies (Northeast, Northwest, Central, and Cariboo) and ways to have open access to labour, business, industry, and other community and private sector social and economic interests.

Responsive Governance

The governance model the participants most often suggested involves a small number of board members supported by a small staff. Most participants favour efficiency and responsiveness over a large bureaucracy. Suggestions for the selection of representatives focused upon existing institutions (such as North-Central Municipal Association and the First Nation’s of northern BC). The participants felt that linkages to the provincial government would be appropriate at the deputy minister level for staff and that some form of reporting access to the provincial legislature should be established through a Minister for the board or council itself.
Clear Roles and Responsibilities

People told us that a northern BC regional development model should serve as a voice for the region, that it should provide input into policy and regulation development, and that it should play an advocacy role for the region and its communities. In addition to being a forum for the discussion of strategic development issues affecting the region, people also said that it could create a solid base for economic development action and be a resource body to which communities could turn for advice on how local plans fit with regional interests. The regional forum model could also undertake a series of vision and strategy exercises across the region, and perhaps even establish a set of northern BC benchmarks to comprehensively track how the region is responding to change.

Independent Funding

To ensure longevity, people supported the principle that a stable source of funding is required for any northern BC regional development model to remain independent of government or funding agencies. There were a wide variety of potential funding sources identified that could be deployed to support a regional discussion model or forum. Key among these for the people who spoke to the Project were the resource revenues that the region generates. People also felt that core funding should involve both operating funds as well as legacy or endowment funds. They also spoke about the need for a commitment of public resources to allow northern BC to move forward in a socially and economically sustainable manner. Finally, there were very clear messages that municipalities, regional districts, band councils, and tribal councils should demonstrate buy-in through nominal financial contributions.

Northern Location

People very clearly supported the notion that any northern BC development model should be housed in northern BC. While it may have a central office, earlier principles supporting sub-regional advisory committees suggest a presence throughout the region in order to enhance access, information flows, and accountability. In addition, people supported a presence in Victoria or Vancouver that could act as a liaison with the federal and provincial government, and supported an annual meeting in Victoria/Vancouver with government/media in order to reinforce the messages from northern BC.
**Complementarity with Local Action**

People, businesses, community groups, and agencies across the region spoke clearly about how any regional framework must not usurp local interests or impose a top down direction. Regional initiatives should be about constructing a shared foundation for region-wide strategic discussions to support local planning processes. Regional development in northern BC should not be about giving up local power; rather, it should be about building communication and collaboration, and developing closer links between a wide range of strategic planning processes and partners.

**Conclusion**

The research team was somewhat surprised at the extent of common ground exhibited by different interests in northern BC. To some degree, the hardship associated with ongoing restructuring and isolated crises demanded a setting aside of smaller issues of division. However, also evident in the varying degrees of unity is a transformation in the north from being simply an economic space, opened-up by infrastructure for the betterment of other places, to a place unto itself. It is this sense of place that, while capable of creating divisions between different or competing claims to place, also creates opportunities and a desire for regional cooperation.

The forces of connectivity and the guiding principles derived from the research findings also provide concrete expressions of regionalism, which may complement more abstract concepts discussed in the new regionalist literature. The northern voices captured in the research provide a rationale to pursue regional development that is notably absent in many policy prescriptions. That said, the voices also encourage a degree of local responsibility for outcomes.

Despite the local interest in regional development approaches, there are a number of critiques and potential barriers that policy-makers should be mindful of when considering and designing a regional development approach (Lovering 1999; MacLeod 2001; Polèse 1999; Munro, 2004), including:

- Devolution to regional development authorities may create a democratic deficit where un-elected individuals determine regional priorities,
- Regional promoters tend to under-represent the continued importance of the state,
- Regionalization creates danger of elitism, parochialism, and loss of ability to enforce the broader public interest,
- Interpersonal conflicts at a local level may become more influential,
- Regional development authorities often lack effective sanction abilities – and are therefore ignored, and
- Regional bodies may require bureaucratic adjustments and power sharing.

These barriers remind us of the complexity inherent within regionalist approaches. Foremost among lessons for success, however, concerns the extent to
which regional strategies reflect the needs and aspirations of the locales. As the provincial and federal governments work to address ongoing and new sources of uncertainty, instability, competition, and opportunity in northern BC, regionalist strategies that are embedded in the dynamics and culture of the north will stand a better chance of long-term success. The voices and ideas captured through the research animate many of the more abstract concepts in the regional development literature and have the potential to lead us to strategies that may help to construct a fully integrated and truly connected north.

References


