

Developing Innovative Approaches for Community Engagement

In the Grand Falls - Windsor - Baie Verte - Harbour Breton Region



SUMMARY REPORT

Ra'isa Mirza, Kelly Vodden and Gail Collins

Department of Geography

Memorial University

March 2012



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable participation of residents of the Grand Falls–Windsor - Baie Verte - Harbour Breton Region to the research project. The report would not be possible without their insights, experiences and commentaries. A special thank you goes out to the Town of Grand Falls-Windsor, the College of the North Atlantic- Grand Falls-Windsor Campus and Exploits Valley Community Coalition for their contributions and support in hosting the pilot project. The support and assistance of the Grand Falls-Windsor - Baie Verte - Harbour Breton Regional Council and the Rural Secretariat has also been greatly appreciated. The researchers would especially like to give an extended thanks to Linda Brett from the Rural Secretariat who was instrumental in putting together this work. Her insights, time and patience are very much appreciated.

The authors would also like to acknowledge the financial support received from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Rural Secretariat – Executive Council for this project.



Questions and comments are welcomed and can be sent to either Raïsa Mirza or Kelly Vodden at the addresses below:

Raïsa Mirza
Masters Candidate, Department of Geography,
Memorial University
(709) 864-8981
raisamirza@gmail.com

Kelly Vodden
Professor, Department of Geography,
Memorial University
(709) 864-8981
kvodden@mun.ca

Developing Innovative Approaches for Community Engagement in the Grand Falls-Windsor - Baie Verte - Harbour Breton Region

A. Background

Newfoundland and Labrador is at a crossroads. For the provincial government, supporting the survival of rural regions depends on finding innovative and inclusive ways of engaging people living in rural areas, in order to increase their capacity to participate in the policy-making processes that will, in part, determine the future of their communities. Effective community engagement should be a first step towards creating the circumstances and opportunities to ensure that rural communities will thrive economically, socially and culturally. Further, community engagement will enable rural Newfoundlanders and Labradorians to take responsibility for collaboratively establishing goals and working together to achieve them.

Issues surrounding rural development are complex; a collaborative approach to policy development is therefore essential. Recognizing the importance of collaboration to finding and implementing solutions to complex problems, Canada's Public Policy Forum launched the Public Engagement Project in 2009 "to explore new ways of thinking about how governments, stakeholders, communities and ordinary citizens can work together." In the resulting 2012 publication, *Rescuing Public Policy*, Lenihan provides five basic principles of collaborative policy development:

1. Good policy is comprehensive: Good policy recognizes the interconnectedness that exists between different fields. Creating policy for big picture issues becomes a societal goal when it is explicitly understood that different fields are deeply interconnected.
2. Real progress requires public participation: Societal goals require more than government action to achieve them. Stakeholders and citizens have a critical role in the understanding and in the solutions of a range of complex issues affecting today's society.
3. Societal goals require long-term planning: Policy processes must be seen as cyclical, aiming at building a long-term working relationship between government, stakeholders and citizens, based on evidence, learning, mutual interest and trust.
4. Every community is different: Even issues that look similar are different in differing communities. As a result, the causes and solutions of a problem will vary by community so public policy must allow for flexibility and implementation at a variety of levels.
5. The public has new expectations: Citizens expect policies will be more transparent and accountable.

Currently, governments within Canada and around the world are taking a closer look at the role public engagement plays in the policy-making process and doing long-term studies to evaluate their current public engagement strategies. In doing so, they are also trying to find innovative methods and techniques for community engagement.

During a June 2011 session, the Grand Falls-Windsor - Harbour Breton - Baie Verte Regional Council identified the topic of community engagement in their region as important for the following reasons:

- Most communities have a small population with persons aged 45 years and older. These individuals are getting burnt out [as they form the majority of volunteer organizations, councils, etc.] and there is a need for greater youth involvement.
- Many transient workers, who have turn-around schedules, for example, are unable to be actively involved in community affairs.
- The survival of rural communities depends on involvement.
- The Regional Council relies on engagement as a way to make sure our “finger is on the pulse,” as a validation of our own ideas and recommendations.
- The provincial government does a poor job consulting and engaging communities. But communities [citizens] are interested and want a voice in the formulation of policies and decisions that affect themselves and their communities.
- New ways to engage are needed.

As a result of that session, the Grand Falls-Windsor – Harbour Breton – Baie Verte Regional Council partnered with Memorial University to evaluate the types of community engagement used in the region in the past, and to research and propose innovative new techniques that could be used to more effectively engage residents in the future, giving them a larger role in the policy-making process.

In order to explore the approaches and methods of engagement used in the past and to identify their strengths and limitations, the project set up a series of 34 interviews with members of the communities around the region and members of the Provincial Rural Secretariat who have been actively involved in community engagement activities throughout the province. In conjunction with this research, the team conducted a literature review—of engagement activities nationally and internationally—to identify some best practices, innovative techniques and methods of engagement that would be appropriate for application in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. Using the knowledge gathered through the interviews and the literature review, the project carried out two pilot citizen engagement activities in Grand Falls-Windsor in partnership with the municipality, the College of the North Atlantic and the Exploits Valley Community Coalition (EVCC). The Grand Falls-Windsor pilot project aimed to assess certain practices and methods that had been identified as successful elsewhere in engaging

traditionally unengaged groups, namely youth and young families. Informed by these three phases of research, the project culminated in a series of recommendations intended to create a more effective process for public engagement in Newfoundland and Labrador.

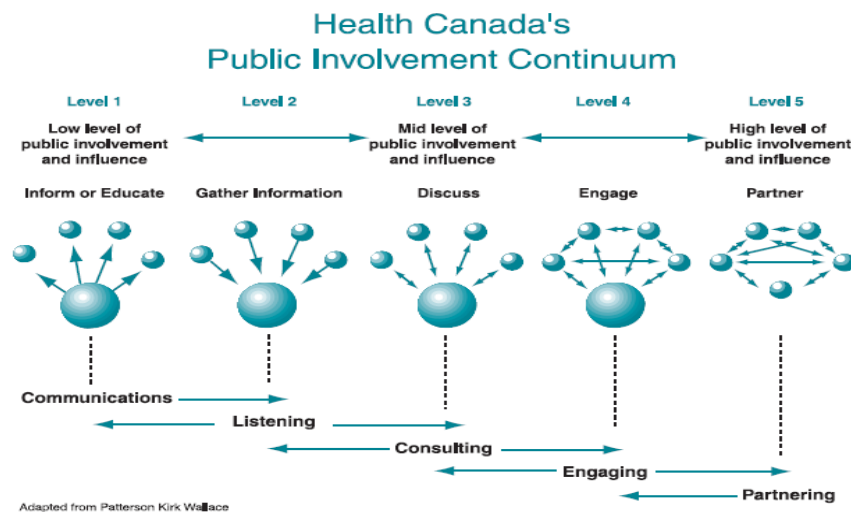
Defining Community Engagement and Its Importance

The words “community engagement” or “public engagement” are used by many people to mean many different things, but in general engagement can be represented in any of the following configurations (Montevecchi 2011):

public		involvement
community	+	engagement
citizen		participation
civic		

This lack of a common definition often contributes to “engagement” being carried out in a way that is unsystematic and inconsistent. The general public often regards engagement as unrepresentative or tokenistic. Therefore, it is important to be clear on what is meant by community engagement in a particular circumstance, and to plan and implement engagement processes carefully. Health Canada’s Public Involvement Spectrum shows how community engagement can take place at various levels (see Figure 1), although true engagement occurs only at the highest levels of public involvement.

Figure 1: Health Canada’s Public Involvement Continuum



Source: Health Canada, “The Health Canada Policy Toolkit for Public Involvement in Decision-Making” (2000), accessed January 16, 2012, http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/pubs/_public_consult/2000decision/index-eng.php

Despite widespread agreement that the participation of citizens in decision-making processes is vital, when they are creating policies or programs, different levels of governments, civil society institutions and community leaders struggle to find ways to meaningfully engage with the citizens they represent. Yet policy issues can no longer be solved by a government acting alone; they are often complex issues needing complex solutions that involve the community as a whole.

Through engagement the public becomes more informed but also, stakeholders and citizens are more likely to assume responsibility for the implementation of a plan if they have had a say in its development. Lenihan (2012, 52) calls this the Golden Rule of Public Engagement and states, "if governments really want citizens and stakeholders to take ownership of issues, they must engage the public in a real dialogue where all parties work through the issues and arrive at the action plan together."

Engagement can be thought of as a new process for collaboration between governments and citizens that is more "open, inclusive, transparent, accountable, and "bottom-up" (Lenihan 2012, p.41). Diverse views co-exist and are recognized and each community is able to dictate that solutions are right for them (ibid., 50).

B. Challenges, Issues & Concerns with Current Practices

Although there is a growing recognition of the need for and benefits of undertaking effective community engagement, governments often rely on out-dated community engagement methods, or do not provide sufficient resources for planning, maintaining and evaluating engagement processes. Often this has resulted in public participation processes that are regarded as unrepresentative or tokenistic: processes that can, in fact, create more apathy and frustration in communities and discourage future participation.

Through the interviews conducted with leaders and youth in the Grand Falls-Windsor - Baie Verte - Harbour Breton Region, this report identified some limitations of past and current practices in community engagement. These were grouped into three main categories.

Timing and Costs

There was a commonly held perception in the region that policy outcomes had already been decided before the consultation sessions were held, and that, therefore, these events were tokenistic and would not change intended outcomes. This perception resulted from the fact that information about the events was poorly communicated: people were not notified far enough in advance, or the notices were not communicated through the appropriate medium to reach the stakeholders. Some people thought that consultations were not designed with the community in mind; for example, some consultation took place while other community events were also happening.

Furthermore, many people voiced the belief that they were not engaged early enough in the consultation process, and volunteers from rural communities were required to make

substantial time commitments and incur out-of-pocket expenses with little or no compensation. Many felt that that a lack of funding to support engagement processes was a key factor in certain groups being left out.

Control/Follow-Up

Many participants felt that their contributions were undervalued. Since there was little or no feedback from consultations, they didn't understand why their opinions were being solicited in the first place. They felt engagement was a one time deal, where an organization came in, solicited their opinions and left. There was no ongoing engagement; people didn't know how or if their opinions contributed to decision-making in any way. People also had difficulty understanding how policies might affect them, as there is generally little to no public education to explain the process and the purpose of public engagement events.

Methods

It was widely felt that governments and municipalities solicited the same people and groups over and over again for involvement in engagement and consultation processes. Also, in public consultation type environments, often only the "loudest" and most confident voices are heard. In some communities, due to a combination of burn out and out-migration, there is a dwindling pool of people who are willing to attend engagement and consultation sessions and/or volunteer or get involved in leadership positions.

Some people felt that civil society organizations are not being meaningfully consulted about policies that affect the groups they work with, and that their constituents are not being given the chance to voice their opinions. The groups that were identified as often being left out of consultation and engagement processes included: youth—particularly young men and boys; families with young children; and disabled and economically disadvantaged communities. Finally, there was a strong feeling that current community leaders are reluctant to let go of their leadership positions, or change certain perceptions that inhibit the ability of younger people to meaningfully participate in their communities.

C. Recommendations

1. The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador should consider adopting a provincial standard for community engagement that incorporates a series of guiding principles. These principles and standards should be developed through an inclusive process. The government should also consider naming a minister responsible for public engagement and a secretariat to support the minister's work.

After a two year study exploring ways governments, stakeholders, communities and ordinary citizens could collaborate to find solutions to complex problems, Canada's Public Policy Forum developed eight recommendations for federal, provincial and territorial governments (Lenihan 2012). Our research for this project supports the importance of the Forum's top three recommendations: naming a minister responsible for public engagement, creating a secretariat to support the minister and developing an

official engagement policy. This is key to moving forward with a public engagement agenda.

The minister would be a voice for public engagement within cabinet and the secretariat would support the minister's work by providing guidance and support to government departments in their public engagement processes; the secretariat would likewise disseminate information on these processes, so the public will know what to expect. Given the role that the Rural Secretariat has played in community engagement and deliberative dialogue in Newfoundland and Labrador, the Secretariat should be considered as an agency appropriate for fulfilling this role. Together the minister and secretariat should establish a clear expectation that high quality, inclusive engagement practices will become the norm in the province.

The importance of developing standards and principles is well illustrated in an example from Scotland. In an attempt to improve the experience of all participants involved in community engagement, the Scottish Government has established National Standards for Community Engagement. The standards are based on a set of clearly defined principles developed with the involvement of over 500 people from communities and agencies throughout the country. The standards allow national, provincial and municipal governments, as well as community groups, to apply the same basic principles for engagement. With similar standards for all government agencies and communities, citizens know what to expect when consultations and engagements take place; they understand the process and their role in policy-making. By making engagement a norm, citizens are less wary of participating as they understand the value governments place on the process and on hearing their voice.

2. The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, municipalities and community organizations must invest adequate time and resources into community engagement methods and practices, and work to engage the groups that are currently unengaged or disengaged in decision-making processes that affect these citizens and their interests.

Engagement is more than just informing or consulting on issues. Rather, it requires a certain level of involvement by the target public in initiating and, in some cases, implementing ideas and programs. For this higher level of engagement to occur, the target population must be informed about the issue, have an understanding of the different stakeholders and the processes, and be able to articulate their needs and future vision. Therefore in order for effective engagement to occur, the government must invest resources in assessing current levels of awareness and capacity for engagement and, where needed, the distribution of issue-related information and in developing local leadership with the capacity to engage their communities. In order to remove financial barriers that might prevent some under-engaged groups from taking part in the process, the government should consider providing funding to cover out-of-pocket expenses for transportation, day care and other identified needs. Similarly, extra resources may be necessary to allow communities to educate and design events aimed at specific groups—youth, for example—who are currently under represented.

Investing proper resources into citizen engagement processes has proven to be a cost-effective solution for governments and institutions seeking direction and legitimacy in implementing programs and policies that address the real needs of the citizens they serve.

3. Community engagement events should focus on using multiple engagement strategies to achieve desired goals.

Relying on traditional techniques and methods has proven largely ineffective in reaching a wide sampling of the public. For example, while certain citizens might be comfortable speaking out at a public meeting or filling out a survey, others may not feel equipped or be willing to do so. In order to be inclusive, engagement processes must cast a wider net. By using a variety of engagement methods, it is easier to reach a wider audience: Different segments of the population will respond differently to different strategies. In some cases, this might mean using Facebook, in others it might mean visiting people in their homes, or giving people a choice of events held at different times of the day. The type of engagement must be designed to accommodate and appeal to the group being engaged. Lenihan (2012, 40), in his principles of collaborative policy development, advises governments to treat each community on an individual basis. He goes on to say that even issues that look similar are different in differing communities. Therefore, public policy must allow for flexibility and implementation at a variety of levels including flexibility in public engagement approaches.

During a meeting with members of the Rural Secretariat a wide variety of engagement methods that can be utilized were discussed, ranging from informal interviews around a kitchen table to public panel discussions or community radio, and the strengths and weaknesses of each were noted. Also during the research phase of this project, interviews in Conne River showed how the multiple engagement methods used by the Miawpukek First Nation Band Council foster a strong community consensus. The methods used ranged from household surveys to focus groups.

Although using different methods of engagement might seem like a serious strain on resources, engaging a larger proportion of the population by using methods that engage different groups of stakeholders, assures governments of a more effective and more comprehensive public engagement process that truly incorporates the views of their constituents.

4. Use technology, arts and media in new and different ways to decrease costs of engaging larger audiences, while providing innovation and inclusivity.

Traditional methods of community engagement have proven to be largely ineffective in bringing excluded voices to the table. By using technology, arts and the media in new ways, traditionally marginalized groups can be included. For example, some communities are experimenting with the use of technology such as Skype to hold meetings with their members to save time and money that would have been spent on

travel. Others are experimenting, using social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to engage youth. In some communities around the world, strategic design is being used to engage communities through the creative and bold use of public spaces. Websites, community level photography, and community radio are other ways that people are being involved. During the course of the pilot project held in Grand Falls-Windsor, youth at CNA were introduced to an online mapping system called CommunityWalk, a mapping tool using Google Maps technology, where they could go online and map their favourite places in town, or add markers for where they wanted new buildings/facilities or modifications. These methods allow policy-makers to reach a wider sector of the population through new and innovative ways that allow more citizens to be involved in policy-making, while, potentially, decreasing costs for governments and opening lines of communication between these groups.

5. Partnerships with local organizations are essential to reduce time and resources spent on engagement processes. Processes should be designed in collaboration with local organisations who understand the contexts and the citizens that are to be reached.

Local leaders have local knowledge that can inform policy and the design of engagement processes. In order to plan effective engagement events, it is crucial to partner with existing groups in communities who can provide guidance or even take a leadership role in the engagement process. Forming these partnerships early will help ensure that the type of engagement will appeal to the target population. This is particularly true for groups who are currently under-engaged. For example, if youth engagement is the goal, it makes sense to partner with schools or youth groups, while a 50+ club may be a good partner for an event targeted at seniors. Once long-term partnerships have been formed with a variety of local organizations, it will be easier to draw upon their combined expertise to mobilize people for large engagement events. These organizations can also provide good channels for providing information about events and about the topic of the engagement to their constituents, so people will be able to provide more informed opinions during the engagement process.

In addition to these benefits, local organizations can sometimes provide local facilities where people may feel more comfortable. Local leaders can also introduce consultants or researchers who come from outside the community, easing their way and making community members feel more at ease. Partnering with local organizations will provide access to a valuable body of knowledge and experience about what works and doesn't work in a region.

During interviews conducted for this report, many community leaders highlighted the importance of partnerships in rural areas. Organizations are able to work together to use scarce resources to provide for the needs of their communities, thus ensuring increased community resiliency. It was also mentioned that partnerships and dialogue fostered through engagement allow organizations to reflect and participate in community-building together— which strengthens the “sense of community” and “social capital” in the area. (A sense of community has been identified as a major factor in

encouraging young people to return to a rural area while Lee et al. 2005 observe that social capital can promote economic growth and be mobilised for developmental benefits more widely.) Finally, partnerships allow for problems to be viewed through the lens of different groups, which makes organizations more likely to collaborate on addressing issues of common interest- allowing for complex solutions instead of isolated programs.

The Grand Falls-Windsor pilot project was made possible within a relatively short timeframe through partnerships with two institutions CNA and EVCC and with the municipality. This illustrates the importance of partnerships in reaching a diverse audience and allowing engagement projects to move forward, sometimes on very short notice.

6. Make greater resources available to support leaders in their work, and to build engagement capacity in communities to engage a greater number of volunteers. Youth engagement is especially essential for succession planning in rural communities and should be supported and encouraged.

Community leaders are an essential element in the creation and survival of strong rural communities. Leaders in rural communities are subject to many competing demands: they are relied upon in multiple ways by their communities and by outside agencies that contact or consult them as the primary contact for their towns. In order to represent and serve their towns, leaders must have the proper skills and resources to design and implement a variety of community engagement events. Through engagement more volunteers can be encouraged, for example, to contribute to community development. Similarly, resources are needed to train volunteers and to support the work they do in the community, expanding on the work of initiatives such as the Community Capacity Building Program and Office of Youth Engagement.

Planning for leadership succession is crucial in rural communities, but this is not always happening. Despite the obvious benefits of engaging and mentoring youth, Locke and Rowe (2010) point out that "some organizations continue to operate in very traditional ways and many may have had the same leaders for decades, do not wish or know how to change, or may not want to give up control. This may be unwelcoming to new recruits. It also points out the need for succession planning and relinquishing of responsibility." This is concurrent with the opinions of many of the people who were interviewed for this report, who felt that "many organizations were not welcoming to youth or their ideas", that community leaders must realize that "they are part of the reason why youth are not participating" and "that no one is willing to trust us" (Interviews 2011).

By contrast, the example of Conne River provides an excellent model for engaging youth. Getting youth involved in community planning and policies is very important to the Miawpukek First Nation. Every grade at the local school has activities related to planning and pride-related exercises that they present to the community in yearly events. For example, in Jeopardy Games youth compete, using knowledge about their

community. The school also has two representatives on Council that receive the same training as adults. Elders and youth are often included in decision-making because inter-generational knowledge sharing is crucial. Youth are valued and are given a strong voice for their community. This results in a high percentage of youth who come back to live and work in Conne River after they have completed their education elsewhere.

The recognition that mentorship is a critical part of youth engagement within community development is growing and some organizations have dedicated time for mentorship and knowledge-sharing as part of their programs. In fact, when mutually respectful youth- adult collaborations has taken place, "most frequently, adults concluded that their level of involvement in the work at hand increased because of their collaboration with youth: "the emotional connection that youth bring to community and youth-oriented issues tends to spark adult interest" (Brodhead 2006, 16).

7. Ensure that engagement activities take place in both formal and informal settings in order to get wider feedback and input into the policy making process.

While formal settings are appropriate for some consultation events, information from the literature review and from interviews conducted in the region show that in order to capture a wide range of public opinion, governments must ensure that engagement activities also take place in informal settings where the participants feel more at ease and comfortable speaking. During the pilot project in Grand Falls-Windsor, members of the research team made contact with students at the College of the North Atlantic (CNA) and young families at the Exploits Valley Community Coalition (EVCC) family resource centre. In these places the research team could interact with members of groups that are often under engaged, and would not necessarily attend formal events held at another location. Many members of disadvantaged groups cannot get to formal hearings or choose not to go for a variety of reasons including: mobility issues, a lack of money for transportation, a lack of time, or a fear that they don't adequately understand the issues and will be ridiculed or harassed when speaking in public. Thus, in order to conduct inclusive consultations and engagement events, it is essential for government to include informal events that take place in familiar surroundings where people feel at ease.

8. Follow-up and feedback is crucial. Community engagement should be looked upon as an iterative processes and not a one time deal. "Reporting back" should be part of all engagement processes.

An engagement process can be thought of in the short, medium and long term and can have different goals and objectives for each step. The earlier that citizens can be brought into a process, the more responsive they usually will be; however, it is essential to go back to them to validate any answers, recommendations or policies that are created as a result of their input.

During the interviews conducted for this report, people stated that they felt that outcomes had already been decided before the consultation or engagement process began. They felt that the engagement process was merely “tokenistic.” As a result, they were less likely to take part in future events. Several things need to be done to combat this perception: people must be notified about the events far in advance, they must be educated about the process and they must be given feedback about how their opinions and ideas were used. If an unpopular decision was made after a consultation, people must be informed of how and why this decision was made and how their point of view was taken into account.

Providing feedback after consultations and answering any questions about decisions that have been made is crucial to building trust and creating the kinds of long-term relationships that will allow for effective community engagement and capacity building. People must be thanked for their participation and know their input was valued. By moving beyond consultation to engagement and partnerships, ideally opportunities are created for citizens to be part of implementing solutions as well as devising them.

9. Ensure the engagement process is transparent. Transparency in engagement efforts is essential for citizens to feel valued and to understand how their input and feedback is being used to make decisions.

How engagement processes shaped policy (or not) should be explained to the community once the decision-making period is over. The public and the government have growing expectations related to transparency and accountability. This new way of thinking is also challenging the processes through which new policies are determined. By making the design of the engagement events transparent—that is, by explaining who is being consulted, how they are being consulted and why—people can have more confidence in the process. They will be able to perceive that an engagement event is genuine and not a tokenistic process (a perception some people have expressed about past events).

Public education about the process of engagement will inform people about what to expect and will help manage their expectations of outcomes. Whatever the outcome, reporting back is essential to the creation of a transparent process. As stated previously, it is also important to report back and answer questions when a consultation does not result in an outcome that many people desired.

Real solutions require genuine collaboration between governments and the public. By engaging communities in finding problems but not in finding solutions, governments are taking away the impetus for communities to find local solutions to problems. By ensuring a more transparent process, governments and community leaders can drastically increase community buy-in for projects and find innovative solutions that focus on creating partnerships for change and not communities that are reliant on top level officials to solve their problems.

References

Brodhead, F. (2006) *Youth in Community Economic Development: Final Report* . The Canadian CED Network Emerging Leaders.

Lee, J., Árnason, A., Nightingale, A., and M. Shucksmith. (2005). Networking: Social Capital and Identities in European Rural Development. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 45:4

Lenihan, Don (2012). *Rescuing Public Opinion: The Case for Public Engagement*. Ottawa: Public Policy Forum.

Locke, F. and P.M. Rowe (2006) *Engaging Young Volunteers (age 15-34): A Research Report*. Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador, Knowledge Development Centre

Locke, F. and P.M. Rowe (2010) *Volunteerism and Community Engagement in Newfoundland and Labrador: A Short History*. Community Sector Council Newfoundland and Labrador.

Montevecchi, Gioia (2010) *Literature Review for Central Newfoundland Community Engagement Framework*. St. John's: Rural Secretariat – Executive Council.