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### Community Development in Rural Illinois: Lessons Learned

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# ***Community Development in Rural Illinois: Lessons Learned***

***Emily IntVeld***

***Fall 2004***

## ***Introduction***

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The following paper is a synopsis, examination, and reflection of my experience as a Peace Corps Fellow in the Applied Community and Economic Development Program at Illinois State University. Compiling and examining the experiences of my class work and practical experience have not been an easy chore. However, a more daunting task has been the reflection on my Peace Corps experience that lead me to Illinois State University and this program, the graduate classes and education I received here, and the application of that knowledge and experience in my professional practice. In an attempt to structure this paper I found myself confronted with the task of weeding through all the lessons I have learned to frame the ones I have found most valuable and will continue to utilize in the future.

In order to fulfill the professional practice requirement of the ACED degree I was hired as a Program Assistant for the University of Illinois Extension Office, McLean County Extension located in Bloomington. This placement came as a result of

my association with the same organization for my graduate assistanceship beginning my first semester at Illinois State University. However, during my first year with the organization I was involved primarily with youth development and programming. My responsibilities originally included writing and implementing a job readiness curriculum for "at-risk" youth in Bloomington-Normal. This first assignment gave me insight into how the organization implemented community, economic and youth development programs in the county. The first year with the organization also provided me with a greater understanding of the diversity of skills needed to make a non-profit organization successful. Specifically, I witnessed the networking and collaboration between our organization and other nonprofits and social service agencies that was essential to the implementation of programs and therefore the success of the organization.

The position I was hired for in January 2004 was designed specifically for work dealing with Community and Economic Development. As a result my duties at the University of Illinois Extension office significantly changed as I was assigned duties that involved working with communities in the East Central Region of Illinois. (See attached map) The Community and Economic Development programs of the University of Illinois Extension are designed to address numerous development issues in rural communities in Illinois. CED Extension program areas include: leadership development, community and economic development strategies, small business development and entrepreneurship, connecting citizens to public policy, tourism development, telecommunications and on-line resources, and statewide demographic trends.

Extension programs are tailored to fit the needs of the community that requests assistance. Very often programs include aspects of each one of the CED issues listed above. Taxes and a recent referendum fund the University of Illinois Extension programs locally, and then that funding is matched by the University of Illinois to provide outreach programming in the state. Therefore, any community or organization can request the help of the nearest Extension office and be provided with services without any additional costs to the community or the residents.

During my professional practice I worked closely with the Community and Economic Development Educator for McLean County and the CED Educator from the Champaign Center. Both of these qualified individuals gave me guidance and support as I began to tackle the requests for assistance from communities and organizations. One of my first assignments with the Extension office was to facilitate a strategic planning session for the Livingston County Board. In the past, the county board had relied on contracted planning specialists to facilitate their strategic planning session and then provide them with a detailed report on what decisions had been made for the year. The task of fulfilling the requirements of the county board and working with the dynamics of the individuals on the board was daunting.

I was warned by several sources before the initial meeting that this planning session would prove to be volatile. The board members were in heavy disagreement regarding the decision to continue funding a local retirement home. The debate over the issue was heated and arguments on that issue spilled over into other discussions. I was fortunate to have the support of other Extension personnel as I facilitated that strategic

planning session for the Livingston County Board. At the end of the strategic planning session the Livingston County Board had made some tough decisions about what the board would do in the county for the upcoming year. It proved to be a valuable session that allowed board members to discuss goals and ambitions for the coming year.

Other experiences I have had with the University of Illinois Extension include: facilitating the strategic planning process for the Iroquois Mental Health Center in Watseka, conducting grant writing workshops and business training seminars for the LeRoy Pride Action Committee in LeRoy, facilitating development planning with the Grow Gibson City Committee in Gibson City, facilitating strategic planning for Monticello, facilitating strategic planning for Atwood, conducting the Community Swap Program in Watseka, Gibson City, Gridley, and Minier, and facilitating the strategic planning process in Chenoa.

During my professional practice I have had the pleasure of working with dozens of communities in the East Central Region, knowledgeable community and economic development staff in the Extension Program, diverse local development groups, and hundreds of individuals from rural Illinois. My reflections and the lessons I have learned from working with this wide variety of people are the core of this paper.

This paper is structured to provide an overview of my entire experience working and learning in Bloomington-Normal. The paper begins with an examination of why community and economic development has gained popularity in rural America, and what small communities are doing to combat the trend of rural flight. Next, I examine some of the strategies and models communities use to jump start development and

encourage growth. Case studies and analysis from two of the communities I have worked with in the last year highlight the programs that University of Illinois Extension has provided and how I have helped implement those programs. Finally, this paper reflects on the lessons I feel I have learned in my professional practice and how these lessons contribute to successful development. This section was the most challenging for me to write, and therefore, I believe, contains the most valuable insights into my professional practice.

### *The Changing Face of Rural America*

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Rural America has been in a state of change for most of the last century. More Americans are urbanized than ever before in American history. “Nearly four out of five Americans live within 273 metropolitan regions.”<sup>1</sup> As a result of the flight to the cities, rural areas are suffering. They lose their population because cities offer better education and better economic opportunity. Many rural cities in America are not willing to allow their towns to become desolate. They want revitalization, they want to emphasize community and economic development, and they want vitality and prosperity while not losing the charm of their town. Volunteer development groups have sprung up in communities all over the nation. These organizations allow for effective participation of community members in the decisions that affect their homes.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniels, T. (1999) *When City and Country Collide: Managing Growth in the Metropolitan Fringe*. Island Press, Washington D.C. p.4

Because of the reality of rural flight, many community members are putting their efforts into transforming their towns through community and economic development means. Community development has been addressed in rural America by both formal and informal means. Communities, governmental bodies, and volunteer groups have found numerous ways to organize for development. All of the models have strived to overcome criticism and distinguish themselves from the broad spectrum of development opportunities available for rural communities. The communities of LeRoy, and Gibson City, Illinois will serve as the case studies in order to examine how these rural communities have organized for development. The model of community development employed by each community, the assets and needs based assessments, and the evaluation of human, social, environmental, physical, and financial capital will all be analyzed. This section will also analyze the results and outcomes of the communities and the recommendations for the future. These case studies will also be analyzed to determine the lessons that have been learned in each community and how those lessons can be transferred to other rural communities interested in development. All community information has been derived from town meetings, committee focus groups, personal interviews, and community evaluations.

From my experience with rural communities during the last year I think the true nature of rural development is one immersed in confusion and contradictions. There is a significant gap between the globalizing world, with the constant demands for information technology and high speed “everything”, and the qualities and values of rural America. To this point there seems to be a compromise that has been reached to

allow the urban areas to explode with population and infrastructure and let the rural areas stagnate with loss of industry and production capabilities. This compromise will not be able to suffice forever. Soon rural Americans will be confronted with the fact that they cannot communicate with the rest of the nation or the rest of the world without high speed communication technology. In order to prepare for the future, rural communities must focus on development now. Development does not have to mean significantly increasing population or the installation of a giant super market. Development has to be seen as preparing for the future of the community in order to allow it to continue to prosper. Rural America will always be an essential counterpart to the urban, the nature of rural development has to be to make rural America as effective as its urban brother.



## *Rural Flight in America*

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Population in America's rural towns and villages has been declining. Since the industrial revolution and the technological advancements in agriculture the United States has seen a steady decline in its rural population. That population decline has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to the industrialization of agriculture and the steady loss of agriculture markets to developing nations. The small world that has been created through globalization has hit the agricultural industry hard. As the economic resources that rural towns have survived on for decades dries up the towns and their residents suffer. "After more than a half-century of subsidies and anti-poverty efforts, rural America suffers a higher concentration of poor people than urban areas. Rural residents, who may enjoy lower housing costs but have greater energy, telecommunications and transportation burdens, make barely 70 percent of the salaries earned by their urban counterparts, and more than one in five rural children now live in poverty."<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the federal government has attempted to address the decline in quality of life in rural areas by offering agricultural subsidies and providing federal funding for improving the agriculture economy. As early as 1910 Theodore Roosevelt began assessments of rural conditions. The Commission on Country Life made specific policy recommendations to improve conditions while maintaining the rural value

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<sup>2</sup> Kotkin, J. (21 July 2002). "If we let rural America die, we shall lose a piece of ourselves." *The Washington Post.com* [online] [cited 1 December 2004] Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A35559-2002Jul20?language=printer>

system. The recommendations of that commission led to the establishment of the Extension Services of the state agricultural colleges. The role of the Extension Services was to develop “concerted action by a centralized national agency for the betterment of rural conditions, especially farming.”<sup>3</sup> Extension services still focus on the betterment of rural areas but the range of programming is expanding.

Extension services still focus on traditional programs such as 4-H. “4-H (Head, Heart, Hands, and Health) is the Cooperative Extension System’s dynamic, non-formal educational program for young people. Its mission is to create supportive environments for culturally diverse youth and adults to reach their fullest potential. The program combines the cooperative efforts of youth, volunteer leaders, state land-grant universities, federal, state, and local governments.”<sup>4</sup> Other traditional programs include, youth development, agricultural and natural resources, and family health and nutrition. Extension service programming is constantly growing and they have expanded to incorporate programming for community and economic development. Community and Economic Development programming has identified the fact that rural communities need education about agriculture and youth development but also have to focus on addressing the sluggish agricultural economy and the effects that economy has on rural communities.

Preserving rural communities throughout the United States is important.

Metropolitan areas are choked by their population density and urban sprawl continues to

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<sup>3</sup> Pigg, K. E. (1991). “Introduction: The future of rural America.” In Kenneth Pigg (Ed) *The future of rural America: Anticipating policies for constructive change*. Boulder: Westview Press. P. 3.

<sup>4</sup> “About Us” *National 4-H Council*. [cited 15 March 2004] Available from: <http://www.fourhcouncil.edu/aboutus/category.asp?scatid=122&catid=4&subid=39>.

burden services and be costly. The existence of 'rural values' is still seen as an important piece of American history and tradition. The ideal still exists that rural communities provide the much-needed counterbalance to cities in terms of morals and ethics. Rural America represents the good, simple life that is missing from urban lifestyles. "American culture embodies a central paradox: in a nation dominated by urban people, our prevailing values derive from rural traditions."<sup>5</sup> Preserving rural America is important for both the moral and economic stability of the United States. They have historically, and even today, relied on a social network of support and identity scholars call "social capital." Many of these scholars see it as an avenue useful for building and sustaining rural communities now and for the future.

One of the most prevalent themes of this paper is the need to harness social capital and channel it into community development. It is very important for any community interested in development to work on building social capital and learning to utilize it to make substantial differences. Large metropolitan areas incapable of allowing full community participation simply because of the logistics of advertising, organizing, sorting through suggestions, and implementing all those suggestions. In rural areas of the county it is possible to have a stronger voice in the politics of the community and have one's concerns and opinions expressed. Small communities play a role in preserving the idea of true citizenship and make actual participation in the democratic process possible.

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<sup>5</sup> Howarth, W. "The value of rural life in American culture." *Rural Development Perspectives: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture*. [online] 27 August 1997 [cited 1 December 2004]. Available from: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/rdp/rdp1096/>

## *Community Development Strategies*

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A review of approaches to community economic development strategies would yield many ways of listing and distinguishing them. However, what I believe effectively characterizes such development, and helps in understanding what is going on in rural Illinois, are a set of distinctions based on two continuums. One is a continuum from “outside to inside”, distinguishing where the major ideas and leadership for community efforts lay. The other contrasts an “expert to civic” dimension, highlighting how much of the effort comes from citizen leadership and how much from professionals with formal training and experience in the various aspects of community based development.

Thus, if a city’s programs are designed by Extension Service professionals, and funded largely by state and federal grants, the approach could be summarized “outside and expert” in nature, or given a new title to summarize that. Of course, cities using the same basic approach could differ a good deal, depending on how much of the leadership and resource, for what percentage of a community’s projects, came from outside and experts. But the two continua would provide a useful, if rough, basis for comparison.

Communities approach development from a variety of circumstances and with a variety of goals. Often communities will turn their focus to formal development following an economic crisis such as a loss of a major employer or industry. Other communities are simply interested in increasing population and providing the infrastructure for those additional people. Because there are a variety of goals and objectives for a community there needs to be a variety of strategies for development. It is extremely common for a community to utilize more than one strategy for

development, and find the perfect fit for their needs. Combining the positives of various strategies allows communities to tailor the development program that will best fit the needs and the assets of that community. In order to achieve an ideal development plan a community must make decisions regarding what end of the “outside to inside” and the “expert to civic” continuums they want to utilize. They must also agree on a timeline and sequence of development that will allow them to reach their goals.

Federal, state, and local governments each play a role in the betterment of rural areas. The federal government’s most significant influence is through granting subsidies for farmers, and providing money for community development. However, the federal government is heavily criticized about who is eligible for those subsidies and grants and where most of the money goes. According to a study by the Environmental Working Group, “Wealthy agribusiness partnerships and corporations reaped about half of the \$2 billion in federal farm subsidies channeled into Iowa in the first three years of the Freedom to Farm program. The other half was parceled out in smaller payments of usually less than \$6,000 to small, family farmers.”<sup>6</sup> Local policy makers have increasingly begun to realize that the health of their communities lies in their own hands.<sup>7</sup> Government subsidies are found on the “outside/expert” end of the continuum because ideas and financing come from outside the community. Recently the most

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<sup>6</sup> “Farm subsidies went to rich farmers in Iowa.” *National Center for Policy Analysis*. 2001. [cited 1 December 2004] Available from: <http://www.ncpa.org/pd/budget/pd011400a.html>

<sup>7</sup> Walzer, N. and S. Deller. (1996) “Rural issues and trends: The role of strategic visioning programs.” In Walzer, E. (ed) *Community strategic visioning programs*. Westport: Praeger.

significant players in creating economic development opportunities have been volunteer organizations. Some organizations work in cooperation with local governments and others work exclusively on their own.

There are numerous state sponsored programs that provide community and economic development opportunities to rural Americans. In Illinois, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) has developed a series of plans that focus on the needs of ten development regions in the state. The program called *Opportunity Returns*, has the goal of providing more jobs in the state. McLean and Peoria County are included in the North Central Region and is managed out of Peoria by a selected manager and development team. The North Central Region's plans include: Promoting Entrepreneurship and innovation, improving infrastructure, strengthening education and job training, investing in renewable energy and the environment, and encouraging investments and open markets.<sup>8</sup>

While the goals and objectives of the state sponsored plan do appear commendable, the actual benefits that will be felt by residents of rural Illinois are still questionable. Large education and training initiatives will still be housed in the larger cities of Peoria and Bloomington. One of the objectives described under "improving infrastructure" provides for expanding Interstate 55 around Bloomington-Normal, but does not address rural infrastructure or road maintenance. The "Promoting Entrepreneurship and Innovation," section of the *Opportunity Returns* plan does not mention the installation of broadband in rural communities or improving their

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<sup>8</sup> "Opportunity Returns" *Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity*. [cited 15 December 2004] Available from: [www.commerce.state.il.us](http://www.commerce.state.il.us).

technology access.<sup>9</sup> It is extremely difficult for the state as a whole to provide economic and development opportunities for individual rural towns. Therefore, communities that rely solely on state sponsored development programs rarely see success with the implementation of those programs.

Another option for rural communities that are interested in development support is to utilize the services of outside consultants and professionals. The benefits of hiring an outside professional include; providing an objective opinion, fairly addressing areas of concern, and providing the community with a professional assessment and evaluation of the communities opportunities. Some of the downfalls that come with hiring or seeking professional services include the expense involved, the lack of relationship or connection to things local, and not understanding the dynamics and power structure of a community. Using outside experts to consult with a community is the exact opposite of the inner, citizen based method of development. The benefits and the downfalls of this strategy often compete against one another. Is it better to have an objective outside opinion or to have someone that is familiar with the community and the systems that are in place in that town?

Some communities are able to afford the luxury of maintaining a community and economic development manager on their village, town, or county staff. This person is usually paid to find the opportunities for development for the community and make those opportunities a reality. These individuals are often faced with conflicts and frustrations while working with the village board or answering to the mayor of a

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<sup>9</sup> "Opportunity Returns" *Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity*. [cited 15 December 2004] Available from: [www.commerce.state.il.us](http://www.commerce.state.il.us).

community. Local CED managers are faced with the enormous task of providing economic opportunity to increase the tax base and make the community more viable, and address the very real and important needs of individuals that may only be interested in maintaining their home, business, or environment.

The option I have found utilized the most in the rural Illinois communities I have worked in during my professional practice is the variations of the volunteer development group. These are groups that form either with the guidance and leadership of the city government, or without and strive to spur community and economic growth in their area. This participatory approach to development is found closest to the inner/citizen end of the development continuum.

Community and economic development and growth take more than a commitment from a few individuals. It requires an entire community's participation. The first step is realization there is a problem and that the community members are capable of tackling that problem. The steps that follow can cause frustration, in fighting, and setbacks. Towns can become literally divided over economic development opportunities or lack thereof. However, it is possible for a community to reach a compromise and make decision that will lead the community to success, growth and prosperity.

Citizen involvement in volunteer development organizations can be achieved through empowerment of individuals to make changes in their own lives. There has been a growth of volunteer organizations and participatory approached to development, and a sense of empowerment for individuals that become involved with them. People



feel a tremendous sense of pride and ownership when they are able to make decision in the communities where they live and work and resent outside forces that attempt to make decisions for them.

However, Frances Cleaver warns that participation in development should be more critically analyzed. Within a community there are many dynamics that must be understood before proceeding with participatory development. Cleaver feels that participation by individuals in a community is not as committed or radical as it once was.<sup>10</sup> The best way for a volunteer group to be successful is for the participants in that group to have a passion for the change they are trying to make.

Organizations will have weaknesses recruiting volunteers for a project if it is not a project that comes from the grassroots level. The only way for individuals to want to participate and have some ownership of a project is for that inspiration to have come from the community. A strength of recruiting volunteers that way is that then they are willing to approach a situation from the assets-based side of development and will be capable of making a real difference.

The volunteer development groups I have worked with in the last year have approached the University of Illinois Extension office in order to meld two of the strategies of community development; the consultant and the volunteer group. The University of Illinois Extension strives to combat some of the downfalls of the consultant strategy by providing an objective opinion in combination with a rudimentary understanding of the community at no cost. The community organizations

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<sup>10</sup> Cleaver, Frances. (2002) "Paradoxes of Participation: Questioning Participatory Approaches to Development." In Edwards and Fowler, *The Earthscan Reader on NGO Management*. London.

that I have worked with in the Extension office are able to incorporate the needs and assets of the community through large town meetings and community input, but can also offer an objective, professional, outside opinion regarding development.

### ***Models for Addressing Community Development in Rural America***

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Realizing that preserving rural communities in America is an important task is only the first step towards discovering how to sustain rural values, and still allow for economic growth. There is significant debate regarding whom or what groups should be responsible for the economic development of a rural community.

Volunteer development groups have sprung up in communities all over the nation. "Community development groups have probably been used-or at least formed-in almost every city and village in the United States to serve as focal points for leaders to address community problems and opportunities. Theoretically, community development can and does occur without formally organized development groups. However, a volunteer development group is one effective way for people to participate, direct, and engage in worthwhile change. Organizations survive by exchanging resources in transactions with their environments."<sup>11</sup> In the central Illinois area

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<sup>11</sup> Pfeffer, J. and G. Salacik, (1978) *The External Control Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective*. NY:Harper and Row.

volunteer community development organizations have formed in Chenoa, LeRoy, Gibson City, Monticello, Minier, Gridley, and other rural communities.

Local governments and volunteer organizations have utilized numerous strategies and models for increasing economic and community development. The participatory approach or volunteer development is one model communities employ to address development. A method of the participatory approach is community-visioning, which was developed by the University of Wisconsin-Extension program. This method helps communities identify local strengths and weaknesses and create action or visionary plans for economic development.<sup>12</sup> The idea behind the visioning method is that there is no goal or objective that should ever be seen as unachievable. Creating a “vision” of the future takes a lot of wishful thinking and sometimes even dreaming. While developing an ideal picture of how the community will look in the future is a valuable exercise it is often criticized because it focuses only on the end results and not the process of development. Encouraging participation from community members is essential to this model because the stakeholders are directly responsible for implementing action plans.

Capacity building is another model that economic development groups utilize. The capacity building model focuses on community well being based on making local organizations and institutions more effective. Capacity building is a process that focuses on the ability of a community to reach its goals. For example, increasing the capabilities of the educational system or the public services in an area is capacity

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<sup>12</sup> Walzer, N. and S. Deller. (1996) “Rural issues and trends: The role of strategic visioning programs.” In Walzer, E. (ed) *Community strategic visioning programs*. Westport: Praeger.

building. Recognizing the organizations and community structures that the area has and then providing for the growth of those structures to be able to meet the future needs of the community is the crux of the capacity building model. This model relies on the ability of a community to take collective action for future development.<sup>13</sup> The capacity building model is found closer to the outer/expert end of the spectrum because of the reliance on outside resources and expertise in order to build the capacity of institutions and organizations.

The asset-based model of development has grown in popularity among communities in the last few years. Kretzman and McKnight, write about the need to move from needs-based development to assets-based development.<sup>14</sup> This form of development is only possible when you have the involvement of people who are willing to dedicate time and skills to development projects. Kretzman and McKnight define the assets of a community as the “individuals, associations, and institutions.”<sup>15</sup> Harvesting the assets of a community is the best way to get citizens involved with development. The Kretzman and McKnight asset-based model is the places responsibility entirely on the citizens and within the community. The assessing, planning, implementing, and maintenance of the asset based development model is comes from the residents of the community, local organizations, and local institutions. This process of development

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<sup>13</sup> Flora, C.B. and V. Luther. (2000). “An Introduction to Building Community Capacity.” In Schaeffer P.V and S. Loveridge (eds) *Small Town and Rural Economic Development*. Westport: Praeger.

<sup>14</sup> Kretzman, John & McKnight, John. (Winter 1996) “Assets-based Community Development.” *National Civic Review*, Vol. 85 issue 4.

<sup>15</sup> Kretzman, John & McKnight, John. (Winter 1996) “Assets-based Community Development.” *National Civic Review*. Vol. 85 issue 4.

takes years to see through, and the result is an increase of local relationships that increase the abilities and value of the community.

The technical assistance model of community development does not focus on the process of community development but instead only on the task. The technical assistance model utilizes consultants and ‘experts’ to analyze the problems in a community from a technical standpoint and suggest solutions. Technical assistance is capable of using scientific means to diagnosis a problem within a community in order to make the appropriate corrections to rectify that problem.

The University of Illinois Extension program Community Swap is an implementation of the technical assistance model. This programs calls on experts from neighboring communities to visit their swap partner and make suggestions for development and growth. The Community Swap prides itself on offering a “fresh perspective” to the community. Other examples of the technical assistance model can be observed in the methods of the Extension Service. The University of Illinois Extension utilizes a method commonly called the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) technique, however the development professionals I have worked with prefer to change the acronym to the SWOC technique (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges). Through this method large groups of community residents are asked to develop lists for each one of the SWOC categories. From those lists focus areas are determined and the Extension professionals work with the community to encourage participation in the various areas of strategic planning.

While I speak freely and often of a combination or secret recipe of development that each community must find, CED theorists do not wholeheartedly agree with this possibility. Many feel that a mixture of models may be a corruption of the values and possibilities of the individual model. I feel that the process of community and economic development is the most essential and the means used to facilitate that process can be drawn from a variety of sources to find the ideal for the area.

While most communities seem inclined to allow for the most participatory approach and seek the opinions of all community residents sometimes those ideals prove to be lofty for the community. Most communities seem to have the desire to work towards asset based development but need the guidance and resources that come from the technical assistance and capacity building models in order to find success.

The next section of this paper will analyze the different methods used by some rural Illinois communities and the successes and frustrations they have found with the community and economic development process.

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## *Case Study: LeRoy, Illinois*

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LeRoy, Illinois is a rural community located in the central Illinois, with a population of approximately 3,500 people. The community is located in McLean County on Interstate 72 between Bloomington-Normal and Champaign. LeRoy's economy has historically relied on agriculture and light industry.

In the past 20 years LeRoy has experienced declining economic opportunity and some loss of population to the more urbanized area of Bloomington-Normal and Champaign. As a result of the economic downturn concerned citizens saw the need to address the economic and development issues of the city. Local volunteers organized to form the LeRoy Pride Action Commission (LPAC) . This committee was dedicated to analyzing the issues that kept LeRoy from gaining more prosperity. The committee gained support from local policy makers by participation from the mayor and the city administrator.

The LeRoy Pride Action Commission also sought outside help from the University of Illinois Extension Community and Economic Development (CED) team. In conjunction with the Extension CED team the volunteer organization decided on what model they wanted to incorporate in the strategic planning for the community. The result was a decision to use the technical model of Community and Economic Analysis derived from the University of Wisconsin Extension program. This model called for guidance from the Extension professionals and utilizing participatory

approaches in planning large community meetings to brainstorm the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges that the community faced.

As a result of the community planning meeting six areas of concentration were identified for the strategic plan. The first area of need was education. While most community members spoke favorably about the educational opportunities in LeRoy there was some concern regarding what more could be done to allow LeRoy students to succeed. LeRoy community members had recently heard of surrounding communities that were being forced to close their schools and merge with other community schools because of lack of funding. Determined not to let the same thing happen in their town the community dedicated themselves to making education in the community a goal.

Another concern identified in the town meeting was the housing needs in LeRoy. LeRoy has an older population that has trouble finding low-income housing. Approximately 24% of LeRoy's population is over the age of fifty-five.<sup>16</sup> Senior housing, in terms of low-income, assisted living, and community living were important topics to the community members. Other housing concerns included housing developments that did not adhere to urban planning regulations in the community. The main reason for noncompliance with the planning regulations is the lack of enforcement and the absence of a full time urban planner.

Tourism and business development was the most emphasized concern by citizens of LeRoy. Community members were concerned about the desolation of the downtown business district and the loss of economic opportunities in the downtown

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<sup>16</sup> "American Factfinder." *United States Census Bureau*. [cited 15 November 2004] Available from: <http://www.census.gov>.



area. Residents expressed a desire to develop some sort of niche to attract tourism and encourage business development in the downtown area.

Related to the issue of tourism and business development is the issue of recreation. LeRoy residents felt that certain recreational activities in the community were being underutilized due to lack of planning and promotion. One such location is the Moraine View State Park. This area has thousands of visitors per year. Residents recognized the need to harness that recreational site and allow the community to reap the benefits of such a high traffic area.

Infrastructure, population retention, and resident services also made the list of concerns that LeRoy residents wanted to address. LeRoy began this community analysis with the desire to find a way to spark the local economy. However, the results of the analysis uncovered other needs within the community that were just as pressing as the economic issues.

The next step in the community and economic development process was to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges each of the six focus areas. This information was generated through small committee meetings. The committee consisted of volunteer participants with an interest and some expertise in the particular issue. For example the local realtor served on the housing committee and the school superintendent served on the education committee. By linking community members to committees where they felt like they had information and opinions to share participants felt more valuable and useful. Also the community was able to utilize some of the human capital available in the community.

The LeRoy Pride Action Committee spent a significant amount of time discussing the assets and strengths of the community. They focused on the aspects of human, social, environmental, physical, and financial capital that the community and its members had to offer. From the discussion and brainstorming that followed each committee formulated one goal that they would like to see the community focus on in the next 5 years. From that goal each group was also responsible for providing objective, strategies, and action plans to meet those goals in the community.

The result of the town meetings were compiled and presented to the community by LPAC and the University of Illinois Extension Community and Economic Development team. The next step for LPAC is to begin implementation, devise a system for evaluation and ensure that the time and energy the community put into the strategic plan does not go to waste.

Working with LPAC and creating the LeRoy Strategic Plan was my first community and economic development project after joining the Extension office. I worked closely with Dr. Nigel Austin the Community and Economic Development Educator from the Champaign Center to implement the models and provide the feedback to the community. My role and responsibilities centered mainly around facilitating group meetings, taking note of the suggestions from community residents, compiling the information into the strategic plan, and constructing the timeline and responsibilities for the plan.

The most enjoyable task of the process was working and interacting with community residents and discussing their suggestions and visions for the future of

LeRoy. The most daunting task of the process was compiling the enormous amount of information and bringing focus into the strategic plan. Now, I am consumed with another daunting task of helping LPAC members and residents of LeRoy implement the suggestions of the plan and facilitate growth.

I feel LPAC made the decision to seek help from the University of Illinois Extension office because they felt they had exhausted their own expertise and knowledge about community development. I think the LPAC organizers were also interested in gaining some credibility by having professionals or experts guide them through the CED process. While the goals of LPAC was to have as many citizens involved in the process, their efforts were fairly limited towards true participatory development. In retrospect the CED planning process might have attempted to be too comprehensive and focus on too many diverse and multifaceted issues. LPAC and the community of LeRoy might have been better served to focus on the most important issue, garner community buy-in and support, develop a plan and a timeline for implementation and see that plan through to completion. If the community buys-in to the proposed project then the support and energy of the citizens will stay strong.

## *Case Study Gibson City*

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Gibson City, Illinois has also recently begun to address the community and economic development needs of their rural town. Gibson City, however, elected to utilize another program of the University of Illinois Extension Office to meet their goals. Gibson City is located approximately 30 miles east of Bloomington-Normal on Route 9 in Ford County. The population of Gibson City according to the 2000 census is 3,373 people. The community is predominately white and 12.4% of the population consists of individuals 65 years of age or older. This data reflects almost no population change from the 1990 U.S. Census data which lists the population of Gibson City at 3,396 people.<sup>17</sup>

Officials and concerned citizens in Gibson City gradually became alarmed because of the lack of growth in their community. Specifically, Gibson City residents wanted to focus on increasing the business and industry in the community in order to stimulate population growth. In response to the alarm of the community and the desire to grow the economic base, Gibson City residents organized the Grow Gibson City Committee. The goal of the committee is stated very plainly in their name, they would like to see their community grow and prosper, while preserving the small town morals and charm that attracted the current residents to the area originally.

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<sup>17</sup> "American Factfinder." *United States Census Bureau*. [cited 23 October 2004] Available from: <http://www.census.gov>

The goal of the Grow Gibson City Committee (GGCC) is commonly found in rural towns, but this goal often creates frustrations as the community strives for controlled growth or growth management. "The purpose of growth management is to provide greater certainty and predictability about where, when and how much development will occur in a community, region, or entire state; how it will be serviced, and the type and style of development."<sup>18</sup>

It is extremely difficult to convince a rural community to focus on growth management when their primary goal is increasing population size and the tax base. Tom Daniel writes that there are certain key elements to growth management that a community must embrace. Those elements include zoning and enforcing government land use regulations, mapping service expenditures, creating tax policies, and offering incentives to encourage smart, controlled growth.<sup>19</sup> The University of Illinois Extension has programming for strategic planning for a community but does not offer services for comprehensive planning. A comprehensive plan is designed to guide the development of a community and should include all of the aspects of growth management.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the Extension office does not have the resources or the staff to provide comprehensive planning to communities. However, the strategic planning process does provide the community with a starting point and is essential for gaining input from the community about how smart growth can occur.

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<sup>18</sup> Daniels, T. (1999) *When City and Country Collide: Managing Growth in the Metropolitan Fringe*. Island Press, Washington D.C. p.3

<sup>19</sup> Daniels, T. (1999) *When City and Country Collide: Managing Growth in the Metropolitan Fringe*. Island Press, Washington D.C. p.3

<sup>20</sup> Levy, J.M. (1994) *Contemporary Urban Planning, Third Edition*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs.

In the spring of 2004, the GGCC contacted the University of Illinois Extension office to request help with achieving the goal of smart and controlled community and economic growth. At the same time the GGCC applied for an Extension program called Community Swap. The Community Swap Program provides a fresh perspective on a community. This program is an example of the technical model of development because it is facilitated by Extension professionals. Towns and cities of similar population, industry, and location select teams to go to the other city and perform an evaluation. The teams are usually comprised of a cross section of the community. Swap teams are encouraged to recruit school administrators, retired people, high school students, members of the clergy, city officials, and business owners to participate in the swap. "More than 100 communities and thousands of community leaders and residents have participated in the Community Swap program since 1993. Community Swap helps communities see themselves as others do. The process helps each community establish priorities for enhancing its image and development."<sup>21</sup> This program utilizes the technical assistance model of community development by calling on experts to offer suggestions that would lead to growth or a more pleasant environment.

During the summer of 2004, I became involved with the GGCC in order to prepare them for the Community Swap program and to explore other opportunities to "Grow Gibson City." One of the possibilities the community was interested in exploring was a media and marketing piece in the form of a brochure or folder that would be supplied to businesses, individuals, and families interested in relocating to the area. This project required numerous meetings and discussions by a large committee of

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<sup>21</sup> "Community Swap" brochure. University of Illinois Extension. p.1

city officials and residents. The committee tried to determine the best way to represent the community and the best way to circulate that information to potential businesses and residents. The Grow Gibson City Committee is still reviewing the various opportunities presented to them including brochures, pamphlets, and radio and television spots on local access stations.

In July of 2004, Gibson City and Watseka, a town with a population of 5,670 people, were matched together for the University of Illinois Community Swap Program. Watseka is located approximately 80 miles east of Bloomington-Normal in Iroquois County. Both communities were very excited to be able to participate in the swap program and quickly organized their swap teams.

A requirement of the Community Swap program is to report and make a presentation to the community visited. On August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2004 the Watseka Swap Team made a presentation to the residents of Gibson City. During the evaluation process team members were asked to comment on community entrances, housing, schools, industry, churches, retail shopping, recreation, tourism, infrastructure, healthcare services, and general observations. When I first began working with this program I was amazed by the wide range of services that the swap team members were asked to evaluate.

Watsaka's presentation to Gibson City did a thorough job of recognizing the positives the community possesses and supply suggestions and opportunities for improvement in the community. The Community Swap program stresses the importance of an honest evaluation and encourages team members to state how they

really felt while visiting the communities. In my experience I have found that communities would rather have an honest evaluation, so they know where their strengths and weaknesses are, then a sugarcoated version of the community. There is a fine line between presenting the impressions honestly and criticizing a community for their shortcomings. I have been extremely lucky in the experiences that I have had in all the Extension programs to meet volunteers that are willing to look objectively at a community and not claim that they are "better" than the community they are evaluating. Because of the cooperation from community volunteers have been able to report accurate, balanced findings, and avoid backlash from communities that are evaluated.

Gibson City utilized the technical model of development through the Community Swap program but they also utilized the capacity building model as they encouraged residents, business, and organizations to contribute to the effectiveness and success of the community. One of the newest programs the GGCC has formulated is an incentive package offered to any person building a new house in the city limits of Gibson City. New home owners will be given over \$1,000 in discounts and rebates for locating in Gibson City. This program allows community residents and businesses to increase the capacity of the community and make the local entities more effective. By encouraging residents to spend money and participate in local organizations those businesses and groups become more successful and effective in the community.

I think Gibson City made good choices in terms of utilizing technical assistance and also attempting more participatory approaches without outside help. I believe the programs that Gibson City has initiated on its own without the help of outsiders have



been far more successful than those initiated or implemented by outside experts. If Gibson City were able to allow for complete citizen centered development then I think they would find even more success. However, Gibson City is absolutely in a hurry to see the direct results of community and economic development and have no desire to take the time to accomplish true assets-based development.

The next section of this paper will analyze the community development programs utilized by LeRoy and Gibson City and examine the strengths and criticisms each town confronted.

### ***Community and Economic Development Analysis***

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#### ***LeRoy, Illinois***

LeRoy, Illinois is an excellent example of a small rural community that has been deeply affected by the rural flight that has occurred in the United States in the last decades. They are experiencing the same problems that many rural communities in America are facing. They are concerned about the education of their children, the economic prosperity of their community, and the future of their town.

The LeRoy Pride Action Committee melded several forms of analysis and model programs together to formulate their five-year strategic plan. The community assessment was a combination of both an assets and needs based assessment. Combining these tools was very valuable for the community because it did not limit the

participants to focusing on just the good or bad aspects of the community, but instead on the community as a whole. LPAC also incorporated several model programs into their community analysis. LPAC sought outside help from the University of Illinois Extension office to offer suggestions and provide tools for development. By requesting this professional assistance from an outside organization LPAC utilized some of the components of the technical assistance model. The U of I Extension office proceeded with strategic planning and development in the community by also utilizing several methods of development. We began with the Community Economic Analysis Model and held a town hall meeting to begin a visioning process for the future of LeRoy. Following the visioning session community residents were asked to perform a SWOC (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges) analysis on their community. The results of the collaborations of LPAC and the U of I Extension personnel and the several models were essentially a diverse combination of strategies for design, implementation, models, and methods to be used in the community.

The reasons LeRoy made the decision to seek outside professional help were because they felt a lack of understanding of the development process, the methods available to them, and they felt like they lacked the tools for successful implementation. The reason the University of Illinois Extension office utilizes several methods of community development is because the dynamics of every community are different and a combination of approaches usually produce the best results.

Overall the process of community and economic development in LeRoy was extremely successful. The community was able to work quickly and efficiently and go

from the initial town meeting to the submission of the final report in less than 6 months. Experiencing the community and economic development process and utilizing the models of development allowed the community to develop a stronger interest in the success of LeRoy. Ideas and strategies were abundant and individuals were really able to pull together collectively for community organizing.

Some of the criticisms of the work done by LPAC surround the level and type of participation. Some community members felt they were being excluded from the strategic planning process. Some city government officials also raised concern that the volunteer organization was treading into the territory of the city government. Issues such as infrastructure and housing can be seen as issues that the city is responsible for and planning beyond the city government can be seen as a threat.

There was also some criticism about one of the aspects that was formerly mentioned as a positive outcome; the participation of experienced individuals on the subcommittees. Some community members claimed that these individuals actually hampered the planning process with defensive attitudes and claims about the impossibility of some suggestions.

One of the important lessons that can be drawn from the LeRoy development experience is that there does not have to be complete adherence to one specific model of development in order to be successful. The positive results in this case study were based on the fact that the models and assessments were curtailed to fit the needs and the desires of the community. Another important lesson is the need for flexibility in community development. LeRoy set out with the intention to address economic

concerns of the community. Their final project focused not only on business development but also included recommendations for improving resident services and low income housing concerns. Other communities can learn a lot from the way LeRoy utilized several models and remained flexible when the outcomes were discovered.

Another key component for successful development is community buy-in. Community members need to have a reason to care about the prosperity of the town and the education being provided by the schools. Without that buy-in then there will be no participation in volunteer development organizations. Community members have to feel the need to invest their time and energy into a worthwhile project. It is the responsibility of the community organizer to make sure the public is adequately informed about the needs of the community and how each member can participate in making it better.

Sustainability is a major concern of community planning groups. There can be very detrimental results if key members lose interest, power struggles ensue, tasks are not carried out, or a wide variety of other circumstances that can sidetrack the best-formulated plans. It is too early at this stage to determine if the LeRoy five-year strategic plan will be sustainable, but there are indicators that point to success for LeRoy. Enthusiastic participation from the community, desire for real community development, and external resources providing support are all indicators that the development project in LeRoy will be sustainable.

### ***Gibson City, Illinois***

Gibson City's economy is based primarily in agriculture and the agriculture industry. The goal of the Grow Gibson City Committee is to diversify that industry and open their community up to more business and industrial opportunities and increase their tax base. Rural Americans know that the tax base and the amount of industry and commerce that they are able to retain in their community directly reflect their success and lifestyle. Schools, government agencies, and services rely on income from taxes in order to provide the best services possible.

Gibson City has a lot of valuable elements that makes the community very attractive to people and businesses. The Gibson Community Hospital is a thriving medical facility and draws people from all over the county to use the hospital's and doctor's park resources. Gibson City also has a very popular golf course. This course pulls visitors from the Bloomington-Normal area and other nearby towns. Another considerable pull of the city is the German restaurant, Bayern Stube. This restaurant is renowned in Central Illinois and brings considerable traffic into Gibson City. These are all excellent resources that funnel people and money into Gibson City. The residents of Gibson City are doing their best to trap those outside dollars in their downtown restaurants and businesses.

As the Grow Gibson City Committee began organizing for community and economic development they utilized the capacity building model of CED. Almost every activity that the community attempted to implement required focusing on the assets of the community and utilizing those assets to attract visitors, new residents, and

new businesses. The first project I worked on with the GGCC was an information flier or brochure to supply to possible new residents and businesses. Following that project GGCC began the Community Swap Project and heavily advertised the fact that their swap partner was extremely positive about Gibson City. The assets based approach allows the community to focus on where they are, the resources they have, and how they can utilize those resources to develop.

John Levy contends that the best way to promote economic growth in a community is through sales and promotion, subsidization and incentives, and making sites and buildings available.<sup>22</sup> Gibson City has attempted to incorporate all of these measures into their community and economic development process.

The driving force behind the GGCC and their attempts at economic development is the enthusiasm from the members and the leaders of the organization. They believe wholeheartedly that their community is the best place to live and they want to let other people know about it. The enthusiasm of the members and their focus on the goals of the organization have been instrumental in the success they have had with community and economic development so far. That success comes in the form of developing incentive packages for new housing developments, researching promotion material, and continuing to explore options to grow the community.

As the GGCC ventured into other programs they utilized other models of community development. The Community Swap Program allowed the committee to get input from experts, such as schools superintendents and real estate brokers to make suggestions for improvement and highlight the quality services that already exist.

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<sup>22</sup> Levy, J.M. (1994) *Contemporary Urban Planning, Third Edition*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs.

Despite their success the GGCC has not escaped criticism. Community buy-in is essential to the success of development and the GGCC has encountered a rollercoaster of support. The formation of the group gained favorable reactions from the community. However, as the organization pursued various develop methods including providing incentives, they were met with mixed feelings from the community. Residents were not convinced that offering tax breaks and other incentives to businesses was the best way to improve the educational system and services.

There are various reason for the mixed feelings that resulted. First, some residents claimed that they were not asked about their opinions regarding the proper way to grow. The response to those claims is that all community members were invited to attend GGCC meetings, those that chose not to attend cannot expect to have they wishes known. Many other residents do attend GGCC meetings and are in favor of development and growth in the community, but the situation changes when that growth can directly affect their way of life. For example, a property owner with children in the school system will probably always be in favor of attracting a manufacturing plant to the community, as long as that plant is not built right next to her home. Community and economic development can lead to volatile feelings in a community. The bottom line is that it is impossible to please all the people all the time, and some members of the community will always feel marginalized.

The GGCC also received criticism for the membership of the committee and who is responsible for leading and decision-making. The GGCC is a volunteer group and open to everyone in the community, however the committee members are mostly

business executives, administrators, and city officials. The problem with not having every sector of the community represented is that those that are not represented tend to feel slighted. The response from any volunteer organization would be that everyone is allowed to participate and make their voice heard and that the population that feels marginalized should attend meetings. However, there are often obstacles that will keep sections of the community from participating. Transportation issues, child care, work conflicts are all issues that would keep members of the community from attending meetings and therefore their opinions would not be heard. This is a dilemma that most volunteer organizations face at one time or another and the answers are still difficult to determine.

The president of the Grow Gibson City recently announced his intentions to run for mayor in the upcoming election in April 2005. This is the second community that I have worked with where the result has been a volunteer deciding to run for mayor. It is hard to determine if volunteers get involved in development organizations and then become interested in pursuing public office, or if they want the public office and branch into the development work to promote their candidacy. Whatever the reason the GGCC and their leadership should feel pleased with their efforts toward development and should continue their commitment to growth and development.



## *Lessons Learned: Harnessing Social Capital*

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The term social capital is one that is very rarely used outside the academic world. Though the term may not be familiar the concept is essential to community development. As a Peace Corps volunteer I understood the power of organizations that formed on the grassroots level and utilized the skills and abilities of their members, but I did not truly understand the dynamics involved until my class work and my experiences in Central Illinois. During my professional practice I came into contact with organizations that successfully harnessed social capital and those that failed to.

The benefits of harnessing social capital are well documented. According to Anirudh Krishna the benefit of social capital is that, “Persons bound together in dense social networks, infused with norms of reciprocity and trust, are better able and more inclined to act collectively for mutual benefit and social purposes.”<sup>23</sup> In other words people will work together and, in fact, enjoy doing so, because they feel inspired by the social network they are apart of. The decision to work together for the betterment of a community is the basis of volunteer development organizations.

People are moved to action by the issues and circumstances that they feel passionately about. One of the strongest motivators I have encountered is education and the quality of local school systems. Many rural school districts in Illinois are facing turmoil because of financial difficulties in their schools. To combat those financial difficulties many rural school districts are forced to consolidate. Parents, teachers,

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<sup>23</sup> Krishna, Anirudh (2002) *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Development and Democracy*. Columbia University Press, New York. p.15

administrators, and students all feel the conflict when a district loses immediate control and is forced to consolidate with another district.

There is a huge push in Illinois to reform school funding in order to provide all students with adequate education regardless of the prosperity of their towns. Communities that have a high level of social capital care about the educational level provided for the students in their communities and work together to keep those levels high. When individuals are bound together for a common cause, such as the education of youth, regardless of the direct outcome for the individual social capital is truly being harnessed.

Other issues that incite people to action regard their homes and the use of surrounding property. Many proposed industrial parks have been defeated by public opinion because of the concern for people's homes and their environment. While this decision might seem as a step backwards in terms of economic development, people stand strong on not sacrificing their lifestyles, safety, or their property even for economic gain. A constant conflict is present between developing a town economically, and developing the services and capabilities of a community. If an entire community bands together and demands that all of their neighbors have the right to a clean, safe, comfortable environment then there is a high level of social capital.

Perhaps the days of neighbors sitting on their porches and sharing the events of the day have past. But social movements and the power they possess are not dead in the United States. Concerned citizens still organize and lobby for the causes they feel are essential to their health and safety.

The basic element I have found for successful development is harnessing the social capital and focusing the resources and energy into development projects. How communities do that and how they allow for equal and fair participation are the most critical pieces of the development puzzle. The following section of this paper evaluates some of the lessons regarding harnessing social capital that I have learned and how community members make contributions to the process.

### ***Lessons Learned: The Assets- and Needs-based approaches***

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Volunteer development organizations must have the ability to invest the trust and commitment that has been formed in communities into making an effort toward social change. Once the social capital of a community has been established then the people must rally around social change at the grassroots level. Assets-based development requires compiling all the assets that a community has and then using those assets towards development. Developing trust and cohesion within a group is important; the next step is encouraging that group to use its skills and abilities to make social change.

Gibson City had the most success with utilizing the assets-based approach and promoting the possibilities of the community. It can be extremely hard for a community that has turned its focus to development to focus on the positives and the

possibilities the community has to offer. Most of the time development organizations spring up to combat the negatives that occur including, loss of population or a vital industry. By focusing on the assets of a community instead of the needs, the growth and development that can be achieved is seen as adding to the already successful atmosphere of the community.

Identifying, praising, and utilizing the assets of a community is a very positive way to address community and economic development. However, I have seen through the strategic planning process and the Community Swap program that communities are really interested in focusing on the needs as well. They want the visiting Community Swap Team to point out the flaws and the drawbacks of the town so they can have some validation for addressing those issues. They love to hear about the success of their schools and the beauty of their neighborhoods but they also want to know about the problems with their infrastructure and lack of downtown business so they can address those problems.

There does have to be a balance between assessing needs and assets. If a community is constantly flooded with needs and problems eventually residents will become frustrated with the process especially if they do not have the resources to address the needs. At those times residents must be encouraged to focus on what their resources are and how they can be used to combat other concerns or issues.

As with most of the discussions that I have in this paper the optimal situation requires a combination of various methods, models, and techniques in order to make development a success. That special recipe for success is sometimes never found in a

community as they search for the best way to address development. I have learned that offering several options and allowing the community to find the best fit is usually the most successful way to handle development.

### ***Lessons Learned: The Art of Leadership***

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Community and economic development organizations have to rely on several key elements. They must have a group of active volunteers that are willing to participate in the development process. They also have to have a leader that can guide the organization and coordinate their activities. Many larger communities are able to rely on paid government staff to facilitate the development process. This person can spend a majority of their time promoting the community and researching possible avenues of improvement. Volunteer organizations that do not have the luxury of a paid staff still need the guidance and leadership of a strong individual to coordinate their activities.

Allan Kaplan writes, "Leadership is about responsibility."<sup>24</sup> He also writes that it is also important for the leader to be knowledgeable, to be responsive to people and situations, and to practice the "art" of leadership. I have found in my work with local

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<sup>24</sup> Kaplan, Allan (2002) "Leadership and Management." In *The Earthscan Reader on NGO Management*, Edwards and Fowler, London. p. 423.

development groups that the success of a group largely depends on the abilities of the leader. A leader that is willing to take on a majority of the work and organize the volunteers is essential to a successful organization.

Leaders come in all shape and forms with diverse backgrounds and individual driving forces. However, they do have some elements in common. Specifically, good leaders are able to inspire confidence in the volunteers they lead and provide insight into the goals and mission of an organization. Strong leaders are also willing to stand alone and face hard challenges that arise. When a development organization is formed there are often negative responses from community residents as they consider the repercussions of growth and change. A strong leader is able to weather the storm of negative opinion and produce positive results.

The art of leadership also requires individuals to utilize a variety of means to reach their goal. From my experience with volunteer organizations it is essential for a leader to network and use personal and professional connections to enforce their mission. The strongest and most successful leaders I have encountered are not afraid to contact people and ask for their help and support. The leader has to be able to “sell” the idea to their peers and set the network connections into action.

The most important tool for a leader to utilize is their own enthusiasm and belief in their goals. A leader must constantly be in support of their organization and the members and express that through the community and in their everyday lives. The development organizations that I have seen fail or achieve less success are hindered by a lack of organization and stable, reliable leadership.

## *Lessons Learned: Finding the Community Identity*

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It has become more important than ever in a world that seems to be unable to decide if it is shrinking or growing for individuals, communities, states, and nation states to find their identity. Rural communities in Illinois are constantly tackling issues that are pressed upon them by a globalizing world. Some of the dilemmas rural communities face include keeping up with new technological advances, and competing with expanding foreign markets. Communities that are interested in development have to draw people to the town and funnel them into their businesses in order to thrive. The community constantly struggles to find their role in the “big picture.” The search for individual identity within a small community can be one of the causes of rural flight as young people seek more diverse educational opportunities and experiences.

Communities also strive to produce an identity that will set them apart from other communities. Towns and villages that want to grow and attract more business, industry and population have to have a niche or specialty to encourage relocation to their communities. They must create an impressive ‘community identity.’

The possibility of a “third identity”, which exhibits concern on a global level instead of a nationalistic or individualistic level, is a utopian ideal. However, due to ever-increasing globalization, cultural, political, ideological, technological, and economic boundaries are shifting throughout the world. People have more options today to identify themselves with. In some aspects these multiple identities can be positive and foster understanding, acceptance, and unity. However, there are many dangers associated with a global identity. Those dangers include an identity cooptation

(Americanization), loss of cultural identity, governance difficulties, communication barriers, power struggles, the economic and technological gap, and environmental concerns.

Collective identity is also shaped significantly through interactions with others and one's participation in or intentional exclusion from differing groups. "To create collective identity there must be a synthesis of commonalities, and members need to notice how much more they are like the other members of the group than they are like people in a different group."<sup>25</sup> This definition of collective identity offers a significant challenge for the theory of a "global identity," one in which everyone on earth can feel ownership and derive some form of personal investment. The challenge that is represented is that in construction of identity, even a collective identity, there is always the mandatory requirement of an "other," with which the identity is compared and contrasted. "A we/they dichotomy is confronted with all group identities, especially in nations. Inherent in the definition of nation is the separation from other nations; the same applies to most other definitions. Inward or outward; security versus opportunity."<sup>26</sup> The relationship is also seen on the community level with the concept of Not In My Back Yard—keeping the "other" out of a rural community.

I often experienced frustration and many times overwhelming indignation with individuals in communities that repeatedly made reference to keeping the "others" or

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<sup>25</sup> Coy, P.G., & Woehrl, L.M. (Eds.) (2000). *Social conflicts and collective identities*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. p.3

<sup>26</sup> Knight, D.B., (1999). People together, yet apart: Rethinking territory, sovereignty, and identities. In Demko, G.J., and Wood, W.B., *Reordering the world: Geopolitical perspectives on the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Boulder: Westview Press. p.221



the undesirables out of “their” community. These discussions would usually manifest themselves when discussions in a community turned to housing, especially low-income housing or discussions of housing affordability. Carl Coon writes that “The ‘us versus them’ syndrome is a foundational element of human nature; it assumes that one treats other members of the in-group differently from outsiders.”<sup>27</sup> The frustrations I felt with what seems to be a universal sentiment would often increase tenfold when I realized that it was not within my professional guidelines to comment on this opinion or attitude.

If it is possible to separate the local from the global then it is also possible to analyze each in comparison to the other instead of as a whole. “There is an asymmetry in almost all discussion of the problem of the global and the local. The asymmetry is in the relegation of the local to subordinate status against the global, which is also associated with the universal, which almost inevitably issues in the objectification of the local that must be explained or defended.”<sup>28</sup>

Residents of rural communities are often forced to overcome stereotypes and assumptions about their education standards, lifestyle choices, and what is often considered a “backwards” environment. Urban areas are constantly criticizing rural America and, more often than not, making them the punch line in stereotypical jokes. Many rural residents especially younger generations feel the need to escape the stigma of the rural lifestyle, other times youth and young adults feel trapped in rural America.

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<sup>27</sup>Coon, Carl,(2004) *One Planet, One People: Beyond Us vs. Them*. p.30.

<sup>28</sup> Dirlik, A., (2001). “Place-based imagination: Globalism and the politics of place.” In Prazniak, R., & Dirlik, A., (Eds.). *Places and politics in an age of globalization*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. p.24

The theories of Zygmunt Bauman in *Tourist and Vagabonds* explore the ideas surrounding the division that exists between those that are able to be travelers and move freely, and people that are not able to move and experience the globe. He sees the differences between those who are able to live globally and those who will only know the world locally as detrimental, he does not see the possibility that the local and global are fatally entwined. “Ability or disability to move divides the world into the globalized and the localized. ‘Globalization’ and ‘localization’ may be inseparable sides of the same coin, but the two parts of the world population seem to be living on different sides, facing one side only-much like the people of the Earth see and scan only one hemisphere of the moon. Some inhabit the globe; others are chained to their place.”<sup>29</sup>

These are just some of the identity struggles I have witnessed while working with communities in rural Illinois. Each individual must find a personal identity, a community or collective identity, and tackle the issue of their place in the world and the entire global context.

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<sup>29</sup> Bauman, Z., (2000). *Tourists and vagabonds: Or living in postmodern times*. In Davis, J.E. (Ed). *Identity and social change*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers. p.21

## ***Lessons Learned: Public Participation—the role of the volunteer public servant***

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A vast majority of the community and economic development groups I have encountered during my professional practice consist of a potpourri of public officials and residents. However, all of these individuals tend to act in a volunteer capacity when working with the community and economic development group. The mayor or a town council member might be an active member of the group, but he or she participates only as another volunteer, albeit a volunteer with considerable prestige and decision making power. Regardless of the official or non-official role the volunteers on the various CED councils I have encountered are all expected to adhere to the guidelines of a trusted public servant.

A strong commitment to public service entails numerous aspects for any individual. Kenneth Ashworth contends that there are three responsibilities that public servants should fulfill. Those include: 1) sharing and spreading knowledge, 2) promoting increased participation among the public, and 3) allowing an open forum of debate for the public and those with whom they want conversation<sup>30</sup>. Another principle I see involved in being a good public servant is the ability to be close to the public and properly understand their goals.

Volunteers in development organization face the overwhelming challenge of trying to please everyone and still create opportunity and facilitate growth. The more information and input these public servants are able to gather will help them make

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<sup>30</sup> Ashworth, Kenneth, (2001) *Caught Between the Dog and the Fireplug, or How to Survive Public Service*. p.163.

informed decisions and guide appropriate development. Communities that conduct surveys are usually inundated with a flood of suggestions about how the area could better utilize resources and the direction development should take. Volunteer development groups must then sort through all the suggestions and opinions and make decisions that reflect the interest of the community and its residents. This role is certainly unenviable and can often cause backlash and criticism of the members and their leader. Inevitably organizations find that it is impossible to please everyone all the time and they find the best solution for development and growth.

## *Conclusions and Evaluation*

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The face of rural America is changing as quickly as the rest of the globalizing world. The loss of economically viable agricultural production and continued rural flight has left many rural American towns in despair. "But giving up on rural America would be a big mistake. The effects of the heartland's decline are becoming readily apparent, and they touch the entire country -- economically, environmentally, socially and culturally."<sup>31</sup> Public participation, and strong, reliable leaders are the most essential needs for success in community development. There are a variety of factors that affect the success and competitiveness of rural American communities. Volunteer and local government organizations have answered these concerns by taking matters of community and economic development into their own hands. Communities face many frustrations and setbacks. However, a dedicated group of individuals can use models, assessments, and community development theories and reach lofty goals in their towns.

My profession practice has provided me with diverse hands-on experience in the field of community and economic development. I have learned a lot from working with the University of Illinois Extension office and implementing their programs in the rural Illinois communities.

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<sup>31</sup> Kotkin, J. (21 July 2002). "If we let rural America die, we shall lose a piece of ourselves." *The Washington Post.com* [online] [cited 1 December 2003] Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A35559-2002Jul20?language=printer>

The most rewarding aspect of the job has been witnessing, first hand, volunteer development agencies at work. Understanding the commitment and dedication of these individuals has been an eye opening experience. Another valuable reward has been working with the Extension professionals that have been implementing programs in Central Illinois for years. Their insight and guidance has been invaluable as I embark on my career as a CED professional. Specifically, I have honed my networking skills in order to facilitate programs that benefit communities.

Most of the frustrations I have experienced during the professional practice stem from the "Not In My Back Yard" attitudes that I occasionally encounter. People fight diligently to protect their town from what they consider negative outside influences and overlook the fact that they are talking about real people that deserve to be treated with respect and be provided the same opportunities for growth. I fear that CED programs often exclude significant portions of the population for a variety of reasons. Though I do believe the exclusion is unintentional, sectors of the population are still going unheard.

Rural Illinois will probably always struggle with the confines of the agriculture economy and the demands of the globalizing world. Community and economic development programs will continue to expand and adjust to the changing needs of the rural communities. My hope is that those adjustments can stay on pace with the ever-increasing demands and rural America will not be lost.

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