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Learning to Build Sustainable Communities through Volunteer Work in Urban and Rural Settings: Insights from Four Case Studies

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Abstract: This paper presents findings from four Canadian settings where volunteers have acquired attitudes, skills and knowledge related to community sustainability. Most of the learning was informal, and includes the three areas of sustainability (social, environmental and economic).

Introduction

This paper is based on data collected through focus groups and semi-structured interviews in four Canadian communities of practice that require a great deal of volunteer work. What brings together the four studies is the exploration of learning processes and outcomes that nurture community sustainability. Due to the different nature of the volunteer work (from promoting alternative agriculture practices to implementing democratic self-governance) as well the type of volunteer participation (from episodic to regular) it was not possible to develop a single instrument for data collection. However, all volunteers were asked to talk about what they learned from their volunteer work: at first, as a broad and open-ended question, and then with specific follow-up questions to elicit tacit learning.

¹ We found that in all four communities, volunteers have acquired attitudes, skills and knowledge that enhance sustainability. Although not all volunteers used the term ‘sustainability’ in their discourses, it was clear that their volunteer work has enabled them to better contribute to strengthening their communities’ sustainability.

Conceptual Framework: Social Movement Learning and Sustainable Communities

Our study was informed by two main concepts: ‘social movement learning’ and ‘sustainable development’. The term ‘social movement learning’ was first used by Paulston (1980) in relation to Scandinavian folk colleges, and it has been recently revived in Canadian adult education circles (Hall, 2006; Hall & Clover, 2005). Social movement learning has an external dimension (learning by society at large) and an internal one (learning by members of a movement). In this study we focused on the latter. The literature on social movement learning is still scarce, and more abstract and theoretical than based in lived experience. This is a significant gap in our field, because it has been repeatedly argued (e.g. Finger, 1989; Lindeman, 1926) that the learning that takes place in social action is more effective and relevant than the learning that occurs in schools. The paucity of literature based in lived experience of social movements can be explained by three reasons: a) social movements have a focus on action rather than on reflection, b) learning is often tacit and unconscious, and c) even when learning is conscious, volunteers have little time to sit down and write about such learning. It is pertinent to note that social movement learning does not only occur in clamorous massive demonstrations but also in the anonymity of regular quiet interactions in a variety of associational spaces, such as volunteering in the community. Learning in these spaces occur within activity systems that mediate individual and social dimensions of learning (Engestrom, 2001).

The notion of sustainability has a long history among indigenous peoples (the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee considered the impact of their decisions on the next seven generations), but the notion of ‘sustainable development’ became popular in the West after the release of the Brundtland Report twenty years ago (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). At that time, sustainability was understood as the satisfaction of the present needs of a community while ensuring the possibilities of future generations to do the same. Later, this focus on the sustainability of ecosystems evolved to a broader conceptualization that evokes images of a better world based on environmental, economic and social justice, and appeals to creating new ways to live and prosper while ensuring an equitable, healthy and democratic future for all people and the planet (Holtz & Brooks, 2003; Sumner, 2005). In our analysis of volunteers’ learning about sustainability in their own communities, we paid attention to the three main dimensions of sustainability: economic, environmental and social.

Case Studies, Community Partners and Methodology

For each one of the four case studies we worked with community organizations and networks. The first one was the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto and the Ontario region of the Canadian Housing Co-operative Federation. The housing co-

¹ For details of the research methodology, please see other publications from this study (Duguid, 2007; Mundel, 2007; Mundel & Schugurensky, 2005; Schugurensky, Mundel, & Duguid, 2006).

operative movement works from the principles of good housing that people can afford, security of tenure, safe and secure communities, control over housing environment, community, and opportunities for personal growth (Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto, 2006). We were interested in looking at what member volunteers learned regarding these principles and how they enacted them in their community practices. For the second case study we partnered with the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (OHCC), a network that brings together a broad-based group of social, environmental, economic, and political associations (Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, 2000). Using various approaches, the OHCC animators promote the development of rural and urban communities that are liveable, equitable and sustainable. Our sample came from volunteers in several groups and associations that are members of the coalition.

For the third case we worked with WindShare, a wind energy generation co-operative, to probe deeper into the learning of volunteers who are committed to developing green energy. Using a co-operative organizational structure, WindShare members provided the financial and human resources needed to develop the first community-based renewable energy co-op in Toronto, Canada. For our fourth case study, we worked with a loose network of farmers in Alberta who are committed to counterhegemonic and sustainable farming practices. Most of these farmers spend a great deal of time volunteering in various organizations part of the sustainable agriculture movement and with other local organizations.

Our methodology included in-depth interviews and focus groups with approximately 100 participants. Initially, when we asked research participants what they learned from volunteering, most said either “nothing” or gave a very brief answer. Based on previous research with members of participatory budgeting initiatives in Latin America and on pilot interviews in Canada, we asked participants whether they had learned specific knowledge, skills and attitudes through their volunteering. This strategy worked very well; not only were participants able to identify a great variety of learning episodes on a variety of themes from the examples that we provided, but they were also able to mention many additional learning experiences that were not in our original list. In many instances, they became aware of the intensity of the learning, and of the impact of a particular learning experience in their current community practices. Many of the stories and examples provided by participants related to the three dimensions of sustainability – social, economic and environmental – which will take up in turn in the following section.

Findings: Learning Sustainability Through Volunteering

Social sustainability

Volunteers reported multiple instances of learning about social sustainability resulting from their participation in their local communities. In many cases, participants learned social co-operation through being part of ‘mini-democracies’ through serving as boards and committee members in co-operative associations. Collective democratic self-management helped members to realize their own potential to improve their communities. As one participant reflected on her experience as a board member in a housing co-op, “I never had that opportunity before to know what I could do.” Similarly, most of the non-episodic volunteering took place in community organizations whose governance structures include some degree of democratic deliberation and decision-making. If democracy is not only a form of governance but also an associational process

of community in the making (Dewey, 1916), it is clear the self-governance dimension of volunteers' work provides ample opportunities for nurturing these 'communities in the making' through the development of a great variety of democratic competencies and dispositions such as trust, interpersonal relationships, self-governance, community building, communication skills, social co-operation and teamwork.

In other cases, learning about social sustainability came more from involvement in the local communities themselves. One volunteer in a community arts project notes that her work, which focused on particular 'problem' neighbourhoods in the city, helped her to understand that "we have to listen to all groups of people, and we have to make it possible and meaningful for all people to participate." For others, the co-op experience helped them to find a collective space to actualize their values through community-based action and to make a positive contribution to society. As one volunteer recounted

There are people out there who want to be part of the solution. They want to be active. So much of what we do we is disconnected... It goes back to the fact that people want to be part of the solution, but most of them don't recognize how to be. The co-op, WindShare, was such a bright light because it gave them an outlet for that.

Interactions among volunteers from different backgrounds were seen both as opportunities for mutual learning and for community building. In the words of one volunteer, "When I see a minister, a pharmacist and a hockey player all discussing together how to solve problems, that to me is what healthy communities is all about." Another important learning dimension of volunteer work, particularly through regular interactions in diverse communities, related to attitudinal shifts. Working with "others" means working across difference of opinions about fundamental values. In some cases, working with people with different ideas led to a shift in perceptions about "others". For example, in many instances, volunteers (from at least three case studies) talked about previously held convictions about gays and lesbians. Through their volunteer work – in many cases with people who openly identified as gay or lesbian – they challenged their previously held assumptions and adopted a different approach. In many of these cases, this process extended beyond acceptance of gays and lesbians to a broader openness to difference and to the development of personal friendships.

An interesting twist to this situation occurred in the case of sustainable farming volunteers. In this case, farmers who were engaged in radical – and therefore challenging – agricultural practices and networks, also volunteered with less overtly radical community organizations such as hospital boards, food banks and youth groups. The data suggest that this was in part a way of negotiating the challenge to the social norms expressed by their farming; their volunteering is a way of showing that they are still part of the community even while they are challenging its norms with regards to the practice of sustainable agriculture.

Environmental sustainability

Volunteers made frequent references to the acquisition of knowledge about environmental topics, often through non-formal education (workshops, conferences, seminars, etc) and self-directed learning (internet, magazines, etc). For instance, a volunteer from an aboriginal environmental group mentioned, "I undertook a lot of research, which increased my understanding of environmental factors that are necessary

for a community to be healthy.” In many cases, groups and organizations formed specifically around learning about environmental issues. As one sustainable farmer noted, “We started one of the first [Organic Agriculture] groups in Alberta. We just started having meetings and put an organization together to share information.” This highlights the deliberate emphasis put on learning and specifically on acquiring and sharing knowledge.

Volunteers also learned about the link between knowledge and action. For example, a volunteer from the Ontario Health Communities Coalition said: “I’m learning that people need to have the knowledge that their individual actions have an impact (i.e. in recycling and car idling). If they know, they’re more likely to do something about it.” This volunteer also spoke about learning how to be most effective in this type of awareness-raising activity. Many volunteers also learned specific environmental skills such as testing water or assessing pollution levels as part of their activities. Others spoke about their learning related to attitudes conducive to a community’s environmental sustainability.

Living [in my housing co-op] for 12 years has affirmed a lot of what I believed before. It is important to live together and work together because it makes the world better. People care about the environment because there are children there they aren't going to throw beer bottles on the ground. Instead they will recycle them. People will plant flowers because they want their place to be nice because children are living there.... After living at [the co-op] for 12 years definitely, the principles and the values fit how I felt before living with the kinds of people around you.

Through involvement in the self-governance activities of the co-op board, this volunteer saw the importance of connecting abstract ideas of environmental protection with the concrete realities of the impact of the environment on children and other community members. For many, learning related to environmental sustainability made linkages that extended beyond the boundaries of their community to the global political economy. In the WindShare case study, it became clear that the local ownership of energy generation has something that multinationals do not – a connection with the ecology and community in which it is established. As one member said, “I think it is probably a good thing because you care more about your local environment.” Each member lives in the region. They breathe the air, they see the smog, they perhaps know the feeling of an asthma attack or staying indoors on sunny days because of poor air quality or high UV levels. Members have a close relationship with their wind turbine because they own it, it is in their geographic region, and it is helping (even if in small ways) with the environmental footprint of energy generation.

Economic sustainability

Most volunteering took place in the context of a voluntary-sector organization. Most of those organizations work on a shoe-string budget – particularly since the cutbacks of the 1990s – and so are acutely aware of the challenges of economical sustainability at the organizational level. As this housing co-op board member recounted, “It is very interesting to know how the co-op works. How we save money, how we get our resources, the regular Joe Blow doesn't have to think about those kinds of things.” While there was certainly a great deal of learning of knowledge, skills and attitudes related to the financial side of organizations – a remarkable learning in and of itself – we

were particularly interested in volunteers' learning that extended beyond their organizations to their communities.

One way in which this learning extended beyond the organization is by looking at the economic impact of a given activity. An example is provided by a volunteer with WindShare, "Health care expenses related to air pollution are worth billions of dollars in Ontario alone.... If you can't go to work because you are unwell how does that affect the economy? And it is the whole world. I don't see it as just an Ontario or Toronto problem." This volunteer recognizes that by participating in WindShare and generating cleaner energy, there is the potential (even if it may be hard to measure) to decrease the amount the public pays for healthcare. As we talked to sustainable farmers in Alberta, several mentioned volunteering with different agricultural organizations to get a better sense of the economical arguments being made for and against agriculture. All family farms are under extreme financial duress – knowing first-hand the importance of economic sustainability – and getting a better sense of how this works at a systems level prepared these farmers to continue "recruiting" other farmers to their cause of environmentally, socially and economically sustainable agriculture.

Conclusions: Building Sustainable Communities One at a Time

While we have presented learning disaggregated by the three areas of sustainability, many volunteers spoke eloquently about their learning that highlights the relationships between these areas. As one volunteer noted, "It is back to that notion of sustainable thinking: all of those areas are intimately related." Others talked about the educational role that their volunteer efforts could play in showing the relationships between the different aspects of sustainable communities. One sustainable farmer was quite involved in the Slow Food movement that brings together farmers, food preparers and eaters to celebrate locally unique food. "For me, the Slow Food thing is that I would like to provide education for consumers. I'd like to be able to tour people and explain what we are doing on our farm and in our community." An important aspect of achieving greater sustainability is teaching and learning about successful models, as is the case of this farm.

While each case study varies regarding the type of volunteer work undertaken and the concomitant learning derived from it, our paper has emphasized the common learning experience around sustainability-related learning in community settings. Volunteers learned many skills related to the sustainable functioning of a community. They also developed attitudes and values conducive to a vibrant democratic community, such as appreciating diversity and nurturing inclusiveness in deliberative and decision-making processes. They developed a great deal of knowledge related to community sustainability by taking a holistic view of different sectors and social dynamics among them. Last but not least, they reported significant changes in their practices. In sum, volunteers in the various communities under analysis reported to have learned skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that help to support sustainability, and have worked to implement sustainability practices that, as Milne (2003) states, gives meaning through the context of everyday life and particularly in the context of community. We hope that the findings reported in this paper help to connect the field of adult education with those of sustainability, volunteerism, social movement learning and community activism.

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