

AN APPROACH TO COMMUNITY PLANNING IN ABORIGINAL SETTLEMENTS

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Abstract/Resume

This paper summarizes an approach to planning for Aboriginal communities. The approach draws on linkages between traditional Aboriginal and modern planning thought to form the basis of a philosophical model for planning in Aboriginal communities. The framework endeavors to be sensitive to local needs and communities' natural environments and is directed to both planning consultants external to communities and to individual communities themselves.

Cet article résume une façon de planning pour les communautés aborigènes. Cette façon tire des liens entre les idées de planning aborigènes traditionnelles et les idées de planning modernes pour construire la base d'un modèle philosophique de planning dans les communautés aborigènes. Le système essaie d'être sensible aux besoins locaux et aux environnements naturels et se dirige à la fois aux consultants de planning aux communautés de l'extérieur et aux communautés individuelles elles-mêmes.

Introduction

Interest for this paper grew out of practical community planning experience with an Aboriginal community in Manitoba during the summer of 1990.¹ The paper is based upon this experience as well as an extensive literature search. The intent of this paper is to outline an approach to community planning for Aboriginal settlements which: (1) is more sensitive to the cultural values of a community; and (2) could be utilized either by consultants external to the community or by the members of the community itself.

This paper attempts to articulate the essential components of the approach proposed. The main components of the approach may not be new to those familiar with issues regarding planning in Aboriginal communities, but the combination of components appears to have evaded planning professionals who have worked with Aboriginal communities in the past. Consequently, a new way of looking at the practice of community planning in Aboriginal settlements is required.

Dynamics of Issues in Aboriginal Communities

Aboriginal communities in Manitoba are unique in cultural, economic, and political terms. Uniqueness demands a parallel in terms of the approach taken with respect to physical, social and economic planning. To achieve these ends, community planning practice must consider the fundamental components of Aboriginal communities. This includes aspects of the people, the government and the land.

Reality is such that real disparities exist across Canada between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.² Current conditions in many Aboriginal communities are a reflection of past and present planning approaches. In light of existing conditions and demographic trends, the need for an appropriate planning process is obvious. Furthermore, the political and administrative organization of Aboriginal people across the country provides a strong indication of a willingness and ability to "plan."

Aboriginal-government relations at all levels (federal, provincial, and municipal) have undergone, and are continually undergoing, transition. In a self-government scenario, relations between Aboriginal communities and municipal governments will assume increased importance. Since planning practices will not be able to proceed in complete isolation from surrounding regions, these localized relations must be accounted for if the planning approach is to be successful. This level of interaction is important because it is where differences in viewpoint between the Aboriginal community and neighboring non-Aboriginal communities, rooted primarily in cultural distinctiveness, are likely to be accentuated. Resolving difficulties associated with such differences in

prevailing viewpoints requires achieving some ground of mutual understanding. An appropriate planning approach therefore necessitates an appreciation for the Aboriginal view of "community" while not being completely withdrawn from normative planning thought. At the core of such views is the importance of land. Land forms a common bond between Aboriginal world views and planning perspectives.

Aboriginal understanding of land emphasizes its importance in life through a symbolic link between the mother of a family and Mother Earth. This demands respect for the land on which one lives (Lyons, 1984). As such, land is respected as a basic element of livelihood and existence. According to normative planning perspectives, however, land is viewed primarily as an economic good subject to supply and demand theory.

As a consequence of the relative importance given to land according to each perspective, the bond represented by land is strained. This basic conflict in perspective and approach to land must be resolved if community planning practice in Aboriginal communities is to improve. Since the concepts of settlement and community are fundamental components of modern life, and since life and lifestyles are largely shaped by culture, the cultural link between environment, settlement and community must be embraced in community planning practice.

Community Planning Experience in Aboriginal Settlements

Planning experiences in Aboriginal communities have resulted in both failures and successes. Different approaches used through the years have had influence on the success rate achieved. In the Manitoba context, three main initiatives have had strong influence on planning practice in Aboriginal settlements: (1) the Community Development initiative in Manitoba in the early 1960s;³ (2) the Comprehensive Community Planning initiative instituted by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) in the late 1970s and early 1980s;⁴ and (3) the concept of Devolution of Responsibility to the Band level instituted by DIAND.⁵ Success from these initiatives was limited owing to a range of problems: implementation strategies often were incomplete or inappropriate; bureaucracy often hindered program effectiveness; and the strong emphasis given to the use of consultants in economic, project-specific planning activities, which often entailed insensitivity to cultural qualities of the communities, generally resulted in ineffective and sometimes damaging planning practices.

An example of ineffective planning practice, which was insensitive to cultural differences, is associated with the Grand Rapids Hydro Project in the early 1960s. Extensive flooding necessitated the relocation of a number of Bands from their settlements. The flooding not only inundated

their land, but also destroyed their traditional basic economy. As part of the compensation for these losses, the provincial government offered affected residents a new settlement in a neighboring area. The planning which produced the new settlement, however, has widely been considered a failure.

The new settlement had terrible consequences. The traditional dispersed pattern of settlement was lost; health standards declined; alcohol abuse, crime and vandalism became widespread; welfare dependency became common. All of these problems, generated by the planned relocation, were virtually non-existent prior to the move.

The changes experienced by these people have been long-term. Approximately one decade after the initial relocation, basic social and economic structures of the community had either disappeared or been permanently altered (Interdisciplinary Systems, 1978). In this example, cultural values and physical settlement design were not considered. The results from this ineffective planning were very detrimental.

There have been recent examples of successful planning practice in Aboriginal communities. Perhaps the best example is that of the planning process used by the MacKenzie Delta-Beaufort Sea Regional Land Use Planning Commission. The planning practice utilized by this commission is considered community based. It is founded on concepts of conservation and sustainable development and reflects strong ties to land and cultural values. Community participation is also integral to the process. The process has been well received by residents because they have had considerable input into decision-making (MacKenzie Delta-Beaufort Sea Regional Land Use Planning Commission, 1990).

The lack of successful practice, together with some successful experiences in other parts of the country,⁶ indicates valuable considerations which may be useful for development of a more effective or appropriate general approach for community planning in Aboriginal settlements. First, it should be recognized that Aboriginal settlements are generally unique in culture, legal jurisdiction, activity, physical structure, social structure, political and governmental structure, and usually consist of no more than 2,500 residents.⁷ Second, conflict is inevitable when change is involved.⁸ Fostering mutual understandings through improved information exchange will minimize conflict. Third, an important element in the effectiveness of any planning process is cultural understanding.⁹ Fourth, community participation can play an important role in community planning and, because of its many and varied potential benefits, is even more important for planning in Aboriginal settlements. It aids in addressing the issue of considering a community as a community, not just simply a group of individuals living in the same location. Finally, experience indicates that one uncompromising approach will not necessarily work in any given situation. Each community will find an approach which is

particularly appropriate for its particular circumstance. Slight differences in approach may occur depending on geographical circumstance such as proximity to other communities and associated influences. Consequently, the ability to address these potential differences is important. "Flexibility through a general approach" becomes key to success.

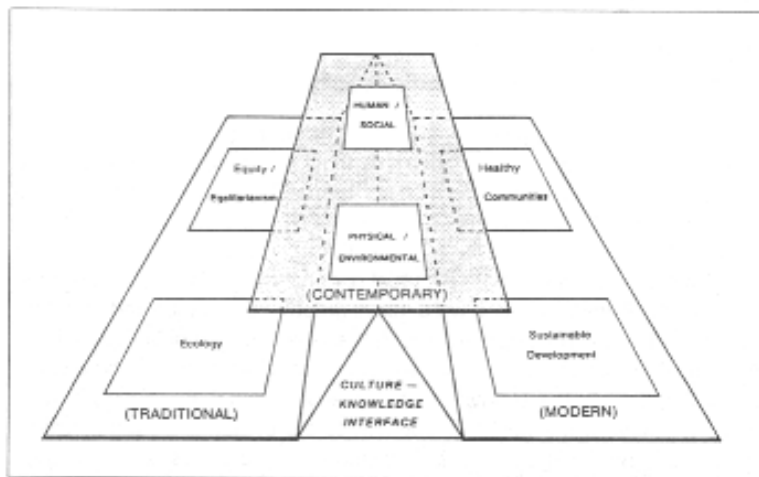
An Approach To Community Planning in Aboriginal Settlements

The approach suggested in this paper has been labelled "The Concept of Parallel Philosophies," because this label expresses the intent of the approach in the most basic terms. This approach seeks to achieve mutual understandings between parties involved in a planning process involving an Aboriginal settlement. It is based upon the main premise that if planning problems can be viewed from a mutual understanding among parties, then the mutually-derived solution will achieve greater acceptance and therefore be more effective. The approach recognizes that the form of both traditional Aboriginal communities and modern community planning can be divided according to human and physical characteristics and that similarity in such characteristics exists between both. In terms of human characteristics, traditional Aboriginal communities include such qualities as leadership, sustenance, learning and physical well-being (Johnston, 1976). In totality, this translates into equity and egalitarianism, and refers to fairness and equality among people. This is very similar to the concept of "Healthy Communities" (Figure 1). By definition, "a Healthy Community is one which strives to identify and reduce inequities in: access to health; access to housing; access to education, and; access to meaningful and adequately rewarded occupations in safe work places" (Kendall, 1989:22). These qualities are similar to the qualities of a traditional Aboriginal community.

In terms of physical characteristics, activities in traditional Aboriginal communities are founded within the bounds of Natural Law¹⁰ and include respect and responsibility between humans and land. The broad scope of Natural Law is a guiding principle in community decisions and can be seen in the traditional Aboriginal view that all decisions be made with respect to "the seventh generation to come."¹¹ From this it can be seen that traditional Aboriginal communities embrace the interrelationship between people, animals, plants and the environment; they embody ecology.

Similarity to the traditional Aboriginal viewpoint can be found in "Sustainable Development" (Figure 1). According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987:43), "Sustainable Development" is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Similarity is also found with the land ethic of Leopold (1966). According to Leopold (1966:236), "a land ethic...reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land."



**Figure 1: The Concept of Parallel Philosophies Model:
The Contemporary, Community-Specific Planning
Philosophy**

The parallels identified in the foregoing discussion form the basis for a link between traditional and modern perspectives. Both perspectives include a culture and knowledge information base which can be combined. Combination of the culture and information base, through the "Culture-Knowledge Interface" as it is termed in the model (Figures 1 and 2), reflects the unique character of the community concerned and helps develop a community specific planning approach. Conditions which influence the development of this approach include the leadership structure of the community, the ideological structure of the community residents, whether or not outside consultants are employed in planning activities, what these activities are, and the level at which planning occurs. Qualities of both perspectives are combined according to the existing conditions resulting with a contemporary, community specific planning approach.

In the process of determining the influencing conditions, a Mechanism for Implementation is employed (Figure 2). This mechanism involves three components: education, citizen participation and

empowerment. The Mechanism for Implementation is intended to foster a sense of mutual understanding and greater local control. Mutual understanding is achieved through the processes of education and participation, while greater local control is achieved through empowerment. These three components can be separate, but they do not operate in isolation of one another. Rather there is an interaction among them. Education and participation interact to generate empowerment; empowerment, in turn, propagates further participation and education.

Separately, each can operate at different levels. Education can be either formal or informal, participation can occur in primary, secondary and tertiary stages, and empowerment can occur on both an individual and collective basis. The different levels enable the flexibility to fully explore and identify the conditions which will define the contemporary, community specific planning approach.

Fundamental to the successful implementation of any process which differs from the *status quo* is education. In a community planning framework, education should be concentrated in three areas: community planning education for members of Aboriginal communities who will become community planners; cultural education for Aboriginal and non-

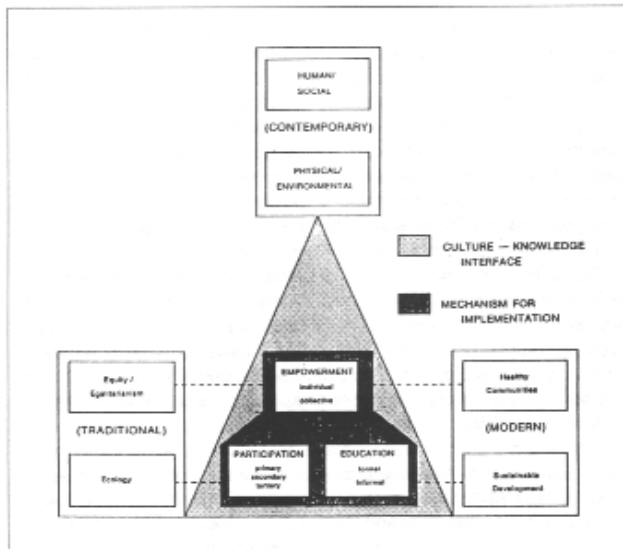


Figure 2: The Concept of Parallel Philosophies Model:
The Mechanism for Implementation

Aboriginal participants alike; and community planning awareness for community residents. If planning in Aboriginal communities is to have a community-based function of the highest order, local residents who will become the future community planners must experience formal planning education. This will enable an appreciation for a broad range of planning research methods and theory, including those of a technical nature. This obviously entails the need for prospective local planners to either attend educational institutions outside of their communities, or for educational programs to be operated locally or regionally. Such education is given greater consideration by Boothroyd (1986), Hedley (1986) and Rees (1986).

Since planning activities may often require the involvement of external consultants and neighboring communities of the larger immediate region, greater cross-cultural awareness will be necessary. Education directed in this regard would most effectively occur primarily on an informal basis through exposure and interaction between planning participants. This would require both patience and effort of all participants.

Education must not end with the "planners." Education should be provided for community residents. Residents should be informed of the forms and functions of community planning and why it is important to "plan" given the complex political and economic forces at work within the different governmental levels present. This can occur on both a formal and informal level through, for instance, school programs or courses, and involvement in community affairs.

An integral means to fostering education, as it is discussed above, is citizen participation. While the precise participation methods most appropriate for any particular community and situation will vary, progression through primary, secondary and tertiary stages will be fairly consistent.

Primary participation refers to preliminary kinds of participation. An example of this kind of participation would be the classic "town hall" meeting. The intent of participation at this stage is to discuss various issues; allow those external to the community (e.g. consultant who will be working with the community) to become familiar with the context in which they will be working; and to set out a course for further participation. In general terms, this stage involves general goal-setting, issue-raising, overall exposure, and identification of potential community leaders who could assume prominent roles in future, smaller scale participation activities of the secondary stage.

The secondary stage is intended to help sort out community priorities and define more specific future participation requirements. An example of activities in this stage would be discussion groups and workshop forums. The intent is to involve more groups of fewer number. This would extend the range of participation and would allow for better representation of community values and goals. This stage would lead into

the tertiary stage.

Tertiary participation is more purpose-specific than secondary participation forms. Community resident planning committees and joint planning/research projects such as those described by Boothroyd (1986), Hedley (1986) and Rees (1986) may develop from smaller participation groups operating at the secondary level. Experience associated with these kinds of projects indicates the potential they hold for successful integration of knowledge. Consequently, this would be a very important form of participation. It is important to note, however, that this kind of participation may generate the need for a return to secondary types of involvement to more clearly define future participation requirements. Secondary participation then assumes a central role in the participation process which not only produces tertiary participation, but is produced by it as well. In this case, secondary and tertiary participation assume a cyclical function which revolves until appropriate alternatives are formulated. The participation methods resulting from this process would be influenced by prevailing values of the participants, each having been influenced in their own right in terms of equity, ecology, healthy communities, and sustainable development. This provides the connection between traditional and modern perspectives and a sensitivity to culture.

In essence, education is an underlying theme participation. Overall, the goal of the education and participation process is to enable communities to improve and prosper. Since a community is comprised of its residents, and the strength of a community depends on its residents, a community will improve if its residents individually and collectively maximize and attain their potential. The combination of education and community participation can help achieve this by developing community empowerment. Empowerment may occur at both the individual and collective level.

At the individual level, empowerment exalts participatory behaviour and motivations to exert personal and political efficacy and control. At the organizational and community level, shared leadership, opportunities to develop skills, and effective community influence are all involved in empowerment (Florin and Wandersman, 1990; Prestby *et al.*, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990). In its entirety, empowerment has both psychological and political influence on a group's ability to generate changes necessary to improve a community's condition (Couto, 1990).

The attainment of individual and collective confidence and competence, the main components of empowerment, are strongly related to citizen participation (Florin and Wandersman, 1990; Prestby *et al.*, 1990). Given this strong reliance on participation, it is no surprise that empowerment has a locally defined flavor. As Zimmerman (1990:170) suggests, "empowerment embodies an interaction between individuals and environments that is culturally and contextually defined." Together with education and citizen participation, this provides a community specific

emphasis well suited for Aboriginal communities given their unique character.

Conclusion

Community-based planning efforts and the interrelated process involving education and empowerment are natural associates. Both draw from community strength, weakness and uniqueness, and both can produce positive effects for the community and its residents. To liberally expand upon the community psychology ideas of Florin and Wandersman (1990), the combined notion of community-based planning and empowerment essentially involves locally initiated problem solving in a geographically based, humanly scaled, volunteer driven manner. A notion such as this is intended to fit the needs of a community and operate within a unique context. This is a notion which supports the concept of parallel philosophies quite well.

The contemporary, community-specific planning philosophy could generate a flexible, unique, community responsive framework for planning in Aboriginal settlements. In its entirety, it is believed that education, community involvement and community empowerment, and all that is entailed in each, can build upon parallel linkages between fundamental elements of traditional and modern perspectives. The notions of equity, healthy communities, ecology and sustainable development can be combined in a manner which can produce a planning approach that every Aboriginal community can call its own and use to embrace the future with confidence and

Notes

1. The approach summarized is that developed in a Master of City Planning thesis (Copet, 1991).
2. Conditions of Aboriginal communities in Canada are well documented in works such as Lithwick *et al.* (1986); Nicholson and MacMillan (1986); and Clatworthy and Stevens
3. For greater description, see Lagasse (1971).
4. For a more detailed explanation of programs and policies involved in this initiative, see Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1983).
5. For elaboration on this initiative, see Rawson (1988) and Government of Canada (1989).
6. The successful experiences referred to include three cases which were considered in the thesis. These are: (1) the community of Kahnawake, Quebec, which was considered for its past apparent success regarding institutional organization; (2) the Berger Inquiry associated with the proposed MacKenzie River Valley Pipeline in 1974-1977, which was considered for the participation process it established; and (3) the current planning process used in the Northwest and Yukon territories of Canada's north.
7. For a discussion considering various general qualities of Aboriginal communities, see Wolfe (1989).
8. Ponting (1986) points out some specific conflicts to be expected in this respect.
9. The work of Ghostkeeper (1981), Wolfe (1989) and Redclift (1987) all lend support to this contention.
10. Natural Law, in this context, is a body of law derived from the rules of nature as understood by Aboriginal people. It is considered absolute in the notion that one cannot violate it without the certainty of some repercussions. The definition of natural law given by Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1986:778) states that it is "a body of law or specific principle of help to be derived from nature and binding upon human society in the absence of or in addition to positive law."
11. For further explanation of "the seventh generation to come," see Bruyere (1986) and Lyons (1984).

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