THE INSIDER-OUTSIDER DIALECTIC IN NATIVE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY IN PROCESS UNDERSTANDING

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

The author was a consultant to the North Coast Tribal Council, for the evaluation of a socio-economic development program. He discusses the design and use of a methodology which gives as much credence to "insider" information and concerns as to those of the "outside" consultants, in part by refusing to assume either fixed problems or an end-product solution in advance.

L'auteur a servi comme expert-conseil auprès du North Coast Tribal Council, pour l'évaluation d'un programme de développement socio-économique. Dans cette étude, il expose l'élaboration et la raise en pratique d'une méthode de recherches grâce à laquelle les renseignements fournis par les personnes affectées par le programme, et l'intérêt qu'elles y attachent, représentent dans l'enquête une part égale à celle fournie par les experts de l'extérieur également appelés à se prononcer sur la question. Un aspect important de cette méthode a été le refus de la part des chercheurs non seulement de faire toute supposition à l'égard de la nature fixe den problèmes étudiés, mail aussi de proposer une solution finale préalablement définie.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to document that which is often most crucial to the success of a project, but which because of its intrinsicly elusive character seldom appears in the formal documentation. I speak specifically of the organizational processes, as distinct from the substantive outcomes, that lie behind those pathfinding initiatives that attempt to overcome some chronic problem in an area of critical concern.

The pathfinding initiative I wish to discuss is that of the North Coast Tribal Council's [1] effort to become an effective socio-economic development agent for its seven constituent band communities. The chronic problem addressed by this effort is that which Beaver so eloquently identifies in the Report of the National Indian Socio-Economic Development Committee, i.e., how are native development organizations going to avoid replicating the bureaucratic centralism and/or paternalistic approaches of their past masters, given that this past has left such a massive residue of community level distrust and skepticism over any development planning? The area of critical concern is specificly how native administered socio-economic development initiatives are to overcome the inherent conflict between the need to access wider economic opportunities while at the same time guarding and enhancing their own social traditions and cultural identities.

There are several reasons why I feel this particular effort is noteworthy. Most manifestly is my own sense that it is perhaps, just perhaps, a critical learning experience in overcoming the accumulation of pessimism and disillutionment that has so notably attended native efforts to gain control over their own destinies. If so, then the experience should be more widely recognized and understood, for like all fundamental departures, it is a fragile thing and easily destroyed, not out of malice, but from ignorance of what it represents. More subtly, though no less importantly, is the hint which this experience offers as to how the broader native/mainstream cultural relations might be restructured in the context of the major change forces that are impinging on both.

In rendering this account I have made no attempt to include any more of the substantive outcome material - what might be called the product of the exercise - than is required to render the underlying processes comprehensible. As a consequence, some of what I say may appear out of proportion to those who viewed the same events from other vantage points. This is as it should be, for my purpose is to project into "figure" that which normally remains "field" in order that innovative background processes may be seen to play the crucial role that they do in achieving substantive results.

So far as is possible, I have attempted to avoid the more obvious pitfalls of participant observation methods and the perspective distortions of my own cultural heritage. I hope that my social scientific training has aided the former and that my long association with the North and its native and non-native communities has tempered the latter. However, the reader should remain as conscious as I have tried to be of the inevitable limitations of participant and cross-cultural reporting. [2]

BACKGROUND

It is no news to anyone familiar with Canada's northern and rural development scene that the past decade has seen a massive increase in the efforts of native Canadians to regain control over their own social and economic destiny. Because it is so fundamental, most of this effort has been directed toward the restoration of resources and the recognition of rights. This is as it should be. But to succeed, it is also necessary to develop two kinds of knowledge without which the attainment of resources and rights may fail to achieve the kind of future to which most native Canadians aspire, i.e., the establishment of economic opportunities within the context of their own cultural traditions.

The first knowledge requisite is an insiders understanding of the particular community process dynamics that pre-date the development initiative. While such community process knowledge is desirable in designing new developments anywhere, it is especially crucial to the native situation precisely because native culture, unlike that of the predominantly atomized white society, has always recognized the centrality of community in the life of the individual. Thus any new development which is not predicated upon a detailed insiders knowledge of the particular social, economic and political process dynamics of the participating community is predestined to failure. Indeed, the case study accounts of many past development efforts - native initiated no less than paternalistically imposed - are littered with derelict projects that foundered because they failed to incorporate the community's particular sense of need or appropriateness.

But if an intimate inside knowledge of community process is crucial for achieving native development goals, so too is a knowledge of the outside opportunity structure. By outside opportunity structure I mean the full range of mainstream organizational and technical structures through which social, political and economic options are made available and rendered functional within the wider context of regional, national and international relationships. Given the power and pervasiveness of these outside forces, no local, community based development initiative is likely to succeed if it does not take into account the relevant elements of this ambience. But since these outside structures are overwhelmingly predicated upon values and assumptions that are profoundly alien and hence threatening to those found inside native communities, many of the problems associated with the new wave of native self-initiated development may be understood in terms of the difficulty of finding ways and means of combining these inside and outside knowledge components so as to affirm rather than negate native cultural identity.

Since most new native development initiatives will require some broader base of organizational and technical support than can be found within the community they are designed to support, native development initiatives are not likely to be able to encompass fully all the required inside and outside knowledge frames. Some means of obtaining, rationalizing and controlling both the internal community process information and the external knowledge requisites thus becomes a crucial pre-requisite to any native development scheme.

For those engaged in development initiatives who are themselves native,

the acquisition of inside community process knowledge may seem the lesser of the two problems. To be sure, there can be no substitute for cultural belonging. But as all native people know, there is a great deal of sub-cultural variety to be found within the native world, and even deep personal familiarity with the target community may not be a sufficient basis for development decision-making. This is because it is characteristic of all community knowledge that it contains a good deal of folklore, including not a few distortions of reality. There is nothing wrong with this at the functional level. Indeed, a certain amount of mystification is required before any social system can operate. But it is important to be able to separate the essential process characteristics from colourful interpretations if they are to serve as a basis for development decision-making. Also, these process understandings need to be organized in a form that ensures comparability with the other knowledge requirements that go into forecasting the developmental impact effects. All of which suggests that while only community members can provide the crucial insider information, there is a need for somewhat more formal instruments for the collecting, inter-relating and evaluation of community process knowledge than can be achieved by personal familiarity alone.

It was the recognition of the lack of such an instrument that caused several concerned social scientists, including myself, to gain assistance from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs for some basic research into remote community life. The goal was to develop a community process model capable of identifying and evaluating by means of social indicators the critical variables through which a community attains, or fails to attain, its "social vitality", "economic viability" and "political efficacy". The utility of such a community process model was specifically articulated in terms of its applicability as a diagnostic research and evaluation instrument of value to local community groups wishing to assess their own situation with respect to proposed development impacts, whether these proposals came from outside agents, their own initiative, or some combination of the two.

While the outcomes of this model building enterprise might be usefully discussed here, space hardly permits such a digression. What are relevant to our current purpose, however, are the following coincidental observations. The model development culminated in a field test pilot study that was conducted in a number of relatively isolated northern British Columbia communities. Two of these communities just happened to be numbered among the North Coast Tribal Council's constituency. The pilot study results were published (Blishen et al.) just prior to the North Coast Tribal Council's decision to reorganize. And finally, the authors of the model asked the Socio-Tech consulting group at B.C. Research to evaluate the model in terms of its applicability potential to their own well-established "action research" approach to assisting community development.

The relevance of these observations becomes apparent when a year after the completion of the pilot study the North Coast Tribal Council contracted B.C. Research's Socio-Tech group to act as outside consultants to their re-organizational efforts. I was then asked by B.C. Research to assist them in

applying the community process model and to act as an independent observer of the whole reorganizational process.

THE TERMS

In essence, the terms of reference of the contract between North Coast Tribal Council and their outside consultants were that the latter should assist the NCTC first in attaining a clear understanding of the range of socio-economic development needs and aspirations within the seven constituent Band communities, and second, by helping the Council design the most effective organizational structure through which it could facilitate such development. Latent within these terms was an understanding of the need for a great deal of sensitivity to the complex, often opaque and currently fluid nature of the political and administrative interfaces that exist between individual Bands, the Tribal Council and the external public and private sector agency environment within which socio-economic development, or the lack of it, takes place.

These terms were themselves the product of a great deal of preliminary discussion between the Band leaders, the Tribal Council executive and the consultants. In the process, three prime tasks were identified. First, it was recognized that the above mentioned community process model was a viable basis for undertaking community evaluation research, but that the detailed design would require extensive local level relevance and acceptability testing. Second, each of the seven Bands would select their own researchers from within their communities. These researchers would then undergo a common training program to be administered by the Tribal Council and their consultants, with the Band managers in attendance. And third, the critical action research issue of the determination of the "ownership" of the research process and results would be pursued as an on-going part of the information gathering and decision-making process which the consulting arrangements were intended to aid.

This last concern for establishing an effective and workable distribution of future development responsibilities between the Band, the Tribal Council and the outside agency levels as part of the research and reorganizational process was somewhat complicated by the fact that the relevant outside agencies wished to maintain a "hands off" policy with respect to the internal review process. While this policy was no doubt motivated by a laudable desire to avoid past "paternalistic" practices, it was also problematic from the perspective of working out an innovative and integrated set of mutually accepted and respected responsibility jurisdictions for the future. It was therefore understood that various ways and means of bringing the principal outside agencies into the review and evaluation process would have to be developed as part of the consultative exercise.

Thus the whole consulting/client relationship, as well as the hoped for relationship with key external agencies, was suffused with an intentional insider/outsider dialectic. This dialectic required raising to a manifest level the tensions which lie latent within virtually all native/mainstream societal relationships. Such a dialectical approach was seen as a necessary and important component

of the consulting process if this process was to facilitate the development of mechanisms and structures through which the Tribal Council could act as an effective interface agency between its constituent Bands and the larger society.

The early identification of these task priorities and modus operandi was a crucial outcome of the consultants' early meetings with the Tribal and Band Councils and clearly established the basis of all subsequent client/consultant relationships. These relations may be summarized as follows: the consultants were to aid the client in developing a process rather than delivering a product; this process would involve continuous learning and evaluation on the part of both the outside consultants and the inside client constituencies; the clients would at all times maintain control over this process through their complete participation and on-going rejection/acceptance decisions; and the consultants would take a fresh look at their mandate at each of these in-process decision points with a view to what these decisions implied with respect to the consultants' most useful contributions to the next stage of the process.

It is worth pointing out that such terms and working relations between client and consultants are in marked contrast to the usual "employment" of outside expertise in the service of inside problem solving. In particular, these arrangements had the following effects:

1. The definition of the "problem" was not frozen into the consultants' terms of reference. It is the nature of real problems that they are as difficult to define adequately at the point of early recognition as is the early determination of solutions. Solutions are therefore not "products" to be delivered by outsiders, but rather "processes" which engage on equal footing the complementary components of inside knowledge and outside expertise.

2. This differential but equal knowledge recognition between client and consultant effectively precludes the unintentional substitution of the consultant's interest agenda for the client's need agenda. It also short-circuits any tendency for the client to surrender the ownership of the problem, and hence the ultimate responsibility for its solution, by progressively contracting out more and more to those who may justifiably claim "special" knowledge of solutions, but who should not - in any event, cannot - maintain a lasting jurisdiction over the problem.

3. Finally, by treating the abstract, technical and universalistic knowledge frames of the consultants and the concrete, experiential and particular knowledge frames of the clients as equally valid to the understanding and solution of problems, the all-too-common tendency to withhold or perhaps reject vital information on each side is undercut.

Thus the client/consultant relationship was carefully constructed and effectively practiced in such a way as to minimize either the "paternalism of expertise" on the part of the consultants or the reverse "paternalism of jurisdiction" on the part of the client. In so doing, both sides were more completely bonded to a mutual learning and accepting approach than is typical in most consulting arrangements. This is a particularly important understanding when it is recognized, as indeed it was recognized, that although the Tribal Council was the formal contractual "client", it was absolutely essential to the task at hand that all the member Bands as well as the principal outside agencies begin

to recognize themselves as co-proprietors of the initiative.

THE PROCESS

The research phase of the project was to serve two functions. The most obvious was the "information out" function, i.e., the determination of the socio-economic development needs and priorities of each of the Band communities. In essence, this was to be achieved by using the community process model as a basis for developing a framework that would identify the existing socio-economic profile of the community at the objective level and the ideally desired profile at the subjective level. The difference between these two profiles would then define the direction and extent of future development needs and priorities for each Band community and, to the extent that this identification produced common themes, for the whole tribal group.

But the research exercise was also intended to serve an "information input" function. By virtue of its pervasive presence within each community, the research project would alert the community to the fact that the Tribal Council was attempting to establish a pan-Band planning and development capability. However, it was also important to indicate that this capability must be from the outset community centred, community controlled and ultimately community dependent if it were to succeed. In other words, the research had to be designed in such a way as to ensure that the "respondents" were not left with the impression that they could simply turn over development project initiative and responsibility to the Tribal Council and then blame them later for failures. Thus the importance of determining distribution of problem ownership and solution responsibility was given early and widespread expression within the research method itself.

The research was also designed in such a way as to communicate its conceptual base back to the community. This was seen to be important precisely because the pilot studies upon which the community process model had been predicated in the first place had revealed the existence of some self-destructive processes within those communities that most clearly needed some social and/or economic development initiative. Thus the first step in motivating and achieving such an initiative would be a community recognition of process problems. The pilot studies had also revealed that in the past many communities had unwittingly initiated or cooperated with development projects that had subsequently proved to be highly disruptive of positive community processes. Since the purpose of both the community process model and the current community research was to cast the community in the role of "planner", it was obviously desirable to include within the research design the kind of feed-back loops that would allow the whole community to develop an understanding of the likely effect of a given development choice upon a reflective assessment of their own established structures and processes.

Needless to say, the design and development of a research project that was at once required to satisfy the subjective requirements of the inside knowledge system and the objective requirements of the outside knowledge frame, while at

the same time ensuring an appropriate distribution of responsiblilty, was not achieved in the usual abstract and academic way. Similarly, the training sessions in which the locally selected community researchers and the consultants struggled together to find the most appropriate methods bore no resemblance to the typically didactic exercises in which those with more formal research expertise tutor those with less on the niceties of how to ask questions. In the process, problems which are seldom recognized in traditional research approaches were discovered and dealt with. For example, while conventional measures of reliability could be applied to the "information out" data, how were the extent and effect of the "information in" data to be measured? And given that the research design anticipated that the subjective "information in" and the objective "information out" functions would be interactive (i.e., as the former was acquired the latter would change), when, how and how often were the two levels of data to be analysed relative to each other? While the original community process model had gone some distance in developing formal measures of the relationship between subjective process variables and objective indicators, this first application test was highly dependent on the informal understandings of those closest to the actual realities for answers to these and many other questions. Of course, to admit this kind of informality into the highly prescribed realm of methodological purity was bound to do some injury to those universal measures of research accuracy upon which expert reputations rest. But if it is the widest possible understanding, rather than the narrowest possible margin of uncertainty, that is most required for the success of a project, then the beloved formalism of the outside knowledge experts must be tempered by the informality of the inside knowledge system if a successful outcome is to be achieved.

And, after all was said and done, the project did satisfy both the inside and outside criteria of success. For those outsiders who require objective evidence before cooperation may be secured, the project provided a well documented set of accustomed "products." Included here were such tangible objects as the clear identification of specific development needs, preferences and capabilities, the emergence of an appropriate development plan and a restructured Tribal Council whose outward facing posture included all the necessary capabilities to meet the mainstream culture's competence criteria. But there also developed an inward facing posture that could not be measured in terms of products but rather took shape as a consequence of the process through which inside understandings were consolidated, solidified and recognized by all. This process also included a growth in understanding of the outside knowledge system and the sense that it could be controlled and brought to bear in ways that need not be destructive to culture, community and self and which might well help resolve some of the chronic inside problems that seemed unyielding to purely internal effort. This same process also brought many formerly intransigent outsiders into contact with the inside knowledge system in a way that engendered various degrees of understanding, but in all cases a new respect and tolerance - a small beginning to be sure, but still a beginning.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, there are some salient lessons to be gleaned from this experience. First, there is the recognition that while any development initiative requires some "information out" objects, community development also requires a knowledge exchange process that includes strong "information in" subjects. For without such an exchange there can be no collective growth in understanding the relationship of what is to what should be and what might be in the context of any given development option. Indeed, if the currently fashionable term "social impact assessment" is to mean anything beyond a cheap strategy to usurp the ability of a community to determine what kinds of development are most consistent with its own sense of being, then such assessment must ensure that community insiders learn as much about themselves from the process as do any outsiders who may be involved. This is only to reiterate what Hayden Roberts (1979) argued as lying at the heart of all community development, the collective learning process:

> An important feature of community development is its assumption that man must take a hand, that he is a necessary and capable partner in the shaping of his life and the life of the society he lives in. In other words, it assumes a capacity for the process of learning . . . on the part of the people in the [inside] group and, if possible, on the part of other [outside] groups...
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> (Roberts, 1979:34-35; emphasis added)

The second lesson which emerges speaks to what in the above quotation appears as only a tentative "possibility", i.e., what I described earlier as the "insider/outsider dialectic". This is a concept of learning which places the very different knowledge frames possessed by outside consultants and the inside clients on an equal footing and that eschews pretense and risks conflict in the belief that deep insights leading to new possibilities will eventually emerge in the context of growing trust and mutual appreciation. While there were no guarantees this would work, the results did justify the risks, and this may give some inspiration to others. At a minimum, it offers a role model for non-native consultants who have tended to be either overly confident or excessively insecure with respect to the applicability of their kind of knowledge to the problems which native clients are trying to resolve.

And finally, the exercise underscores the importance of engaging in a predevelopmental process that recognizes that serious problems have a variety of proprietors and hence their solutions require some careful working out of the most appropriate distribution of responsibility. In this particular example, there was a real danger that an interface organization like the North Coast Tribal Council would be assigned the job of mediating the initially incompatible expectations of their inside constituents and the outside agents, thus incurring the blame for the failure that must inevitably result from such buffer arrangements. But by engaging in the dialectical process that forced both the outsiders and the insiders to recognize their own ownership of a piece of the problem, the probability of achieving a viable distribution of solution responsi-

bility is greatly enhanced.

In presenting this account of one aspect of a much broader and still ongoing initiative, my intention has not been to offer yet another packaged prescription for others to emulate unquestioningly. Indeed, if there is an ultimate lesson in any of this, it is that there has been far too much focusing on pre-packaged products rather than on discovery processes in the pursuit of social and economic development projects. If past history is any guide, the solution of pervasive societal level problems will not be achieved by "break-through" innovations, but rather as the consequence of many different resolution attempts resulting in the mergence of a whole new collective consciousness of what causes problems and what represents solutions. The experience described here would appear to be one such step along this road.

NOTES

I. The North Coast Tribal Council constituency is spread along the remote fjords and islands of north coastal British Columbia. Its offices are located at 718 Fraser Street, Prince Rupert, B.C.

2. While none can be held responsible for what appears here, I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Frenchy Louis, Clarence Martin and Frank Parnell of the North Coast Tribal Council; Bert Painter, Bill Warren and Allan Sutton of B.C. Research; Dr. Katie Cook and her staff at the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs; and to the Skeena Manpower Development Committee for generously supporting my own participation in the project.

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