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# Inter-Community Cooperation in the Micro-Region: A Saskatchewan Perspective on Rural Development

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*Harold Baker*

## ABSTRACT

*The application of the concept "inter-community cooperation" in rural development in Saskatchewan, Canada is explored. It is argued that there is an emergence of a new geographic unit of development which is referred to as the "micro-region." The micro-region represents the growing inter-dependence among neighboring, small urban-centered communities in optimizing rural development. Selected references to inter-community cooperation experience in the larger "macro-region" (province or multi-province area) are reviewed. It is concluded that emphasis on the macro-region is giving way to the smaller micro-region. Selected topics on the application of inter-community cooperation in micro-regions are discussed, including some ground rules of application, circumstances that foster cooperation, barriers to cooperation, benefits from cooperation, and risks/costs of cooperation.*

The purpose of this paper is to explore the recent experiences in the province of Saskatchewan, Canada, in applying inter-community cooperation as a concept in rural development. For purposes of this discussion, "inter-community cooperation" may be defined as "the presence of deliberate relations between otherwise autonomous communities for the joint accomplishment of individual operating goals" (Schermerhorn, 1975:847). The concept is treated in this paper as being largely synonymous with "inter-municipal" and "inter-organizational" cooperation.

Inter-community cooperation assumes a perceived interdependence between and among communities, which is found whenever a network of two or more social units (communities) are connected by dependencies for resources or performances of any sort. The intensity of the interdependency network increases when dependencies involve larger social units linked through more complex patterns involving more extensive coordination with greater perceived long-run consequences (adapted from Bradshaw and Blakely, 1979:102). Two or more communities may be considered interdependent if they take each other into account in pursuing individual goals.

Rogers and Whiten (1982:14) view "cooperation" as being a more voluntary behavior than "coordination," though cooperation may result in coordinative efforts. Cooperation between two communities results in two separate and autonomous outcomes, whereas coordination results in a more formal and compromised outcome, assuming less autonomous action by the partner communities. This discussion emphasizes voluntary inter-community cooperation.

### **An Earlier Discussion of "Inter-Community" Regions**

Rural development appears to bring together two forces: one force toward decentralization into more dispersed centers in a smaller rural region; a second toward centralization into an urban-centered region with a more depopulated surrounding region (Parr, 1981). However, there are serious problems with the centralized regions, such as deteriorating hamlets and villages and increasing costs of travel for goods and services for those remaining. So, there is a continuing search for a "unit of development" with optimum economies of scale, with greater economic and social diversification, with optimum social participation and control at the local community level, and which is socially enriched by the intensity of new relationships.

Economic under-development or decline has often been the basic concern behind serious consideration of inter-community cooperation. The concern for the improved developmental jurisdictions has been of interest in many countries: for example, in Britain (Cullingsworth, 1970:299-300); in France (Landau et al., 1976:64-65); and in India (Gusfield, 1975:94).

A review of the literature indicates that discussions on the cooperation among communities in macro-regions (one or more provinces or states) began several decades ago (Kolb, 1959; Aron, 1969; MacIver, 1970; Jones, 1973; Bonner, 1975). There is no clear evidence why interest seems to have faded in the interim period. One can speculate that perhaps it occurred after the early 1980s, when governments could no longer afford the large grants and subsidies to relatively large development projects provided during the preceding decade.

Kolb (1959:9) suggests that multiple community patterns began to emerge in the 1950s. The process is one of differentiation and interrelation-town and country

interests merging into unified community systems. According to MacIver (1970:262), "The claims of the smaller and of the greater community have been in antagonism all through history, for history is in large part the record of the widening community. In every case the widening of community has involved conflict. Men have found it most difficult to realize the necessity of both (large and small), and that intrinsically they are not opposed but complimentary."

Rural people live in an expanding community for many of their basic functions such as jobs, service delivery, organizational affiliations, political and social participation and mutual support. No single urban community, unless very large, is likely to be able to provide all the services demanded by people. And in some rural communities, although population has declined, the desire for enhanced services has remained (Jones, 1973:121).

Researchers at the Institute for Rural America (1969:62) suggest that these new expanded areas or "larger communities," as problem-solving vehicles at the local, grassroots level, are designed to compensate for the four major limitations of existing public and private institutions. These limitations include: (1) the requirements of scale economies; (2) the inability to treat the inter-relationships of problems; (3) the incapacity to provide comprehensive solutions; and (4) the failure to achieve an appropriate response to increased rates of change.

### **The Emergence of the Micro-Region in Saskatchewan**

Hodge and Qadeer (1983:97) found that in Canada, especially in provinces such as Ontario where communities are large by prairie standards, trade center relationships and the work commuting patterns resulted in many basic needs being provided by regional complexes of towns and villages. In each rural locality, a number of small centers collectively meet the needs from their own distinctive arrays of stores, services, jobs, and social and cultural activities for the residents of small towns and the countryside. Hierarchical arrangements within these complexes are difficult to discern, as are regional boundaries between complexes.

During the 1980s, there has been evidence in Saskatchewan of the emergence of a modified concept of a relatively small, "inter-community cluster" or "micro-region." The micro-region, as discussed here, is larger than the conventional local community, but smaller than the "trade center system" or macro-region (province or multi-province area) of the 1950s to 1970s (Stabler, 1987) and smaller than the "prairie community system" (Meredith, 1975). Macro-regions have frequently been analyzed in relation to the theory of "central places." The emerging "macro-region" involves a limited number of rural trade centers, usually of similar size. It may not have a larger "central place" within its boundaries.

There is also evidence, in varying degrees, of the emergence of a similar type of developmental region in other provinces/states in North America; such regions can be found in Alberta, New Brunswick, and Iowa, for example. The trend is

especially important in the Great Plains Region of North America. This rural region supports a particularly large number of smaller communities that are vulnerable to decline, yet must strive to provide convenience goods and services to their rural residents—primarily farmers and ranchers.

Saskatchewan provides an interesting jurisdiction to examine and experiment with the “inter-community” concept. It has fewer than one million people in a land area approximately as large as the state of Texas. There are several pressures for inter-community cooperation to take place. Perhaps foremost among them is a long-standing view in the province that for production agriculture to be healthy and viable, it needs to be supported by healthy and viable rural communities. During the 1950s, the province rejected a recommendation of the Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life to implement “county” governments, preferring to maintain authority at the smaller rural municipal level. Consequently, there are some 366 rural municipalities and some 600 urban municipal governments. The majority of the trade centers are agriculturally based. In recent decades, the trends toward large-scale organizations, improved transportation technology, sophisticated communication technologies, and the globalization of markets and prices make it difficult for small, local urban centers to remain viable on their own. Nevertheless, there is emerging an unprecedented degree of serious thought at all levels of governments regarding cooperation among such communities. Federal and provincial government departments are initiating policies and programs designed to encourage cooperation, particularly on a voluntary basis. Many grants for community facilities and programs, involving, for example, recreation, are now available if two or more communities sponsor the proposals. Two other examples illustrate this policy and program direction.

In 1988, the government of Canada, under its Department of Employment and Immigration, initiated a Community Futures Program as one of six programs under its Canadian Jobs Strategy. Community Futures allows for the orchestrated efforts of business, labor and community groups, in cooperation with the three levels of government (municipal, provincial, and federal), to address specific employment-related needs for a particular area. It is intended particularly for communities in both populated and sparsely populated areas hit by major layoffs, plant closures and chronic unemployment or underemployment, as well as communities struggling with economic decline and those that have demonstrated the ability for permanent growth and development. It has several options from which the communities in the area may choose. These include: a Business Development Center to support existing and new small firms through loans, loan guarantees and advisory services; a Self-Employment Incentive Option that provides \$180 per week for up to 52 weeks to encourage unemployed persons to set up a small business; a Community Initiative Fund Option, to support innovative and worthwhile initiatives established by the Community Futures Committee; an Institutional Training Option, which provides occupational training to workers to increase their earning

and employability; and a Relocation and Exploratory Assistance Option, designed to assist workers who are unemployed in the Community Futures region to have access to improved job opportunities in the region or through relocation. By 1989, there were nine Community Futures programs approved in Saskatchewan, each region consisting of a number of rural municipalities and small urban centers, the majority of which are under 1,000 population.

The second example of policies encouraging cooperation is Saskatchewan's Rural Development Corporation Act. The government of Saskatchewan, under its Department of Rural Development, introduced the Rural Development Corporation Act in 1986, making it possible for any four or more municipalities, one of which must be a rural municipality, to develop joint ventures that would enhance the social and economic well-being of their regions. Provided certain requirements associated with area opportunity studies and strategic plans are met, the provincial government provides \$132,000 over the first five years of operation. By June 1989, twelve rural development corporations were organized, involving some 86 rural and urban municipalities (over 50 communities). At the local, municipal government level, there are several incentives for leaders to embrace such programs. Drought in recent years, combined with low markets and prices for export products such as grain, potash and oil, have reduced provincial revenues normally shared with local municipalities. Further, local municipalities are witnessing rural depopulation, from both farm and main street businesses, due particularly to the downturn in the farm economy.

Initial experience with these programs over the first two to three years has brought a new awareness to local and provincial leaders of both the importance and challenges of inter-community cooperation. Local governments have not previously given strong leadership to rural development in a community development context. They have been preoccupied with building and maintaining roads, cutting weeds, controlling rats, and such matters. They are coming to appreciate that if they are to be successful in their leadership relating to entrepreneurship and job creation, the whole micro-region must be involved in a meaningful way. A tradition of competition and conflict among these communities, though often friendly in nature, has not necessarily taught them to be cooperative in community and regional development affairs. They are having to learn how to cooperate.

In 1986, prior to the initiation of both the above programs, the Saskatchewan Committee on Rural Area Development (SCRAD)—an inter-organizational group made up of more than a dozen organizations with province-wide interest in rural well-being—called a provincial conference with “inter-community cooperation” as its theme. Approximately 150 community and agency leaders met for two days to discuss the benefits and costs of cooperation among communities, municipalities and organizations. The staff of SCRAD's Secretariat prepared an inventory of programs already operating on an inter-community basis, such as libraries, fire protection and safety, waste management, and recreation (SCRAD, 1986). Since

that time, the topic has been high on the agenda in developmental affairs in the province.

### **Some Non-Cooperative Community Behaviors**

If one examines the way communities relate or interact, there are several typical "noncooperative behaviors" that can be observed. A *competitive* behavior involves each local community attempting to achieve its own objectives (facilities, services and so on), usually causing some adverse effect on one or more of its neighboring local communities. Also, there may be an attempt to provide goods and services already available in nearby centers. A *conflictive* behavior occurs when each local community perceives its neighboring community(ies) as antagonistic and threatening. The community turns inward on itself, becoming antagonistic toward its neighbors, thus resisting cooperative ventures. An avoidance behavior occurs when one local community deliberately refuses to acknowledge the existence of another. A *coexistence* behavior occurs when each local community plays down any differences with its neighboring communities, and each behaves as though it were a total or near-total community. A *resigned* behavior involves a recognition of having lost in the win/lose game of inter-community rivalry, the luck of the draw on resources or the influence of central planning decisions. This type of community comes to accept blight, decline or demise without much struggle. All of these behaviors, or forms of community interaction, are distinct from inter-community cooperation, where several local communities join together in a micro-regional community to enhance the common good of all.

### **Observations in the Micro-Regions**

During this brief few years working with the micro-region in Saskatchewan, the author has reviewed a number of the programs, provided training for various groups associated with the Community Futures and Rural Development Corporation programs, has been a member of the board of directors of an RDC, and contributed to the conference on inter-community cooperation previously mentioned. Certain observations can be made that may be helpful to other jurisdictions initiating programs involving inter-community cooperation.

Kolb (1959:9-11) identifies three stages involved in inter-community cooperation: (1) community formation, (2) differentiation, and (3) interdependence. He contends that regional clustering of centers involves a simple principle of "unit requirements for social institutions," including appropriate volumes of business and participation, number of adults required to have schools and other social entities, requisite area in square miles and travel time between centers. This implies that each viable community must meet certain

demand (or social service) threshold requirements. This conceptualization from an earlier period is useful in our observations of micro-regions.

### Some Ground-Rules of Application

The voluntary approach appears to work effectively, likely more so than a bureaucratic, top-down approach. One might question whether or not the federal or provincial funds provided are the most appropriate way to initiate the process. However, communities are not likely to start micro-regional development on their own, at least until the approach can demonstrate success elsewhere. If more orderly solutions for effective planning are to emerge, they will have to be based on the insights that the public, the politicians, the business community, the labor leaders, and the elected officials have developed from experiencing the benefits of the cooperative approach.

In the micro-regional community, cooperation can take place at many levels and for many purposes. Voluntary councils, civic boards, special interest groups and committees representative of local communities can work toward more effective and efficient planning and service provision in the micro-regional community, involving health, education, transportation, agricultural processing, commercial services, recreation, social services, local government, job creation, small business, cooperatives, labor groups, conservation and any problem, issue or opportunity of special importance. Previous experiences in cooperation at these levels sets a healthy groundwork for more effective cooperation with partner communities in the micro-region.

Perhaps most important, cooperation should be based on two important premises: first, that the autonomy of local communities should be maintained to the greatest degree feasible, and, where possible, strengthened; and, second, that the fundamental role of local government should be facilitated and its authority should not be threatened. Where these matters are neglected, the potential for inter-community cooperation is put at serious risk.

### Circumstances that Foster Cooperation

There are various circumstances that tend to foster cooperation among communities: 1) They may simply believe in cooperating to achieve their developmental objectives. It may be part of their history to cooperate, arising from tradition, experience or leadership; 2) They may be encouraged by external environments to cooperate. Encouragement may come from a government agency, corporation, cooperative or association, or from field workers, consultants or politicians skilled in developing cooperative relations; 3) They may experience an opportunity for cooperation, such as using a natural resource that can only be exploited if they work together, or operating a community service that otherwise

would not be viable; 4) They may recognize some mutual need or purpose which may outweigh their natural desire or conventional custom to "go it alone." Among the strongest mutual needs are those that stem from the threat of decline or demise, or the loss of a valued service or facility, especially if the threat comes from outside the communities to be affected.

There is usually no single condition that stimulates inter-community cooperation. Several factors are likely to prevail before cooperation will become the behavioral pattern.

### Barriers to Cooperation

Some barriers are related to the nature of people and communities, and may not be very easy to overcome. Others are related more to the "know-how" in the community. Considering the community factors, when there are extreme cultural differences, or, in contrast complete homogeneity among partner communities, cooperation may be more difficult. It may be hampered by political conservatism—a narrow or limited view of how the world can and should operate. There may be distrust of other communities, through lack of experience with cooperation, or through negative experience with cooperative efforts.

Some communities with an extremely competitive spirit, accustomed to "win/lose" rather than "win/win" or "win/no loss" situations, may find it difficult to see the benefits of cooperation. A high rate of leader turnover, sometimes due to "voluntary fatigue" from the intense involvement required, reduces the likelihood of keeping cooperative ventures going.

Considering the know-how factors, some barriers arise from a lack of awareness, knowledge or understanding on the part of those involved. For example, a rural development corporation took over the administration of a federal military base that was closing. The Board Chairman, a farmer and rural municipal representative, found himself dealing with the administration of a 22 million dollar asset and admitted inadequate experience and training to do the job. The essential principles of cooperative endeavor, as compared to competition or conflict, had to be followed. Cooperative endeavor among communities, in contrast to the "bits and pieces" approach often used by the small local community, almost always calls for long-term planning. Further, people must perceive that the benefits of inter-community cooperation will outweigh the costs. Sometimes the individuals or organizations sponsoring or promoting the inter-community cooperation are inappropriate since they may not be well accepted in the area. Finally, the lack of a clear mandate, role, or purpose for the inter-community organization which is essential, both for the operation of the group and for its ability to communicate its reason-for-being to the people of the micro-region. Communities considering an inter-community cooperative

venture will benefit from identifying, and working hard to reduce or eliminate, the barriers to success that seem most likely for them.

### Benefits from Cooperation

It is recognized that the local community both loses and gains in the process of expanding to the larger micro-region through inter-community cooperation, but there are some main benefits. Each participating community derives a great deal of knowledge about such matters as how to organize and use professional specialists, leadership, trade skills, funding and raw materials. By working together, communities can present a united front that helps them deal more effectively with external agencies, such as governments. The thorough discussion normally called for facilitates a more objective examination of the side effects of development programs undertaken. The cooperating micro-region is more likely to develop links with other micro-regions and with larger urban centers making it more feasible for rural areas to attract business, industry and people. Local control can be increased over issues, problems and opportunities that transcend and affect more than one local community. Through persistent practice of inter-community cooperation, inter-community conflicts are likely to be reduced.

For the local community, participation in the micro-region will offer a more complete, less conforming living environment than it could provide by itself. Community spirit is likely to be enhanced in all the local communities.

### Risks/Costs of Cooperation

Arguments against inter-community cooperation must be considered. In some cases, the losses may be deemed to be enough that communities may opt to resist cooperative endeavors. In micro-regions where there is a dominant center, the leaders in the larger center may feel that they have "won the race" and that to cooperate would result in a gain to the smaller places at the expense of their larger center. If the micro-regional organization tends to become quasi-governmental, administering central government grants and programs at the "micro-regional" level, it tends to be more difficult for the umbrella organization (board or council) to remain sensitive to the needs of local partner communities. Leaders in the micro-region may tend to represent the special interests of some association (trade or profession, religious order, or other grouping) rather than the interests of each local community. No one multi-centered community can deal with all development issues. Community clusters that would gain from cooperation on industry may differ from those gaining from the provision of child care. The micro-region may find it difficult to meet the more intimate needs, involving emotions, sentiment and kinship, normally provided by the local community.

The local community may get locked into costs involving time, energy and funding associated with such matters as transportation, communication, organizational maintenance and membership fees. These costs may be particularly hard on resource-poor communities. There also may be a perceived loss of autonomy by the local community, since there is an expectation in joint decision-making that the local community will limit arbitrary or unilateral decisions involving the micro-region.

### **Some Future Directions**

True cooperation among communities is hard to attain and will always present fresh problems to solve. Initially, micro-regions demonstrating successful enterprises and developments are needed at strategic locations that are similar to those in which community leaders have interest, and demonstrations are needed to show that micro-regional communities and their municipal governments can play an effective part in shaping their own destinies. It is important for people in prospective cooperating areas to observe exemplary communities at work and to be able to exchange information with respected leaders external to the community.

More information and education are needed to help make "cooperation" a positive value in rural areas, as compared to the norms of competition and conflict. Competent leadership is one of the essential factors to ensure success. As the mediators of inter-community roles, community leaders need to understand how to facilitate the opening of community boundaries to positive influences from outside; closed boundaries appear to inhibit developmental efforts. Community leaders at all levels should be helped to understand how their economies and social patterns are fundamentally tied to the economies and social patterns of the larger micro-regional communities and beyond, and how they can best maintain their autonomy by taking advantage of their interdependencies. This is not to suggest that they break contact with the macro-region of which they are a part; on the contrary, they increasingly also need a global perspective. Only in this context will the micro-region be successful in the long term in enhancing local self-help in rural areas.

The times may be right for inter-community cooperation and micro-regions to emerge naturally. However, it is worthy of note that the more formal micro-regions in Saskatchewan have been spawned over the last three or so years by government programs and incentives. This fact raises interesting questions about what the role of central governments should be in encouraging development in micro-regions. What would happen should a new political party come to power? If as proposed in the rural development corporation program, micro-regional communities are expected to carry on independent of central government support after a period of about five years, will the programs survive? What is the appropriate period of financial support or of local leadership development? Several more years of experience are

required before the answers to such questions will emerge. In the meantime, there are critical opportunities and challenges ahead for inter-community cooperation in the micro-region. The need for careful, on-going assessment of all aspects of their development is a necessary part of the process.

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