

Understanding the Strategic Social Plan in the Framework of the New Rural Secretariat

**Themes Emerging from the Seminar Held by the *Values Added*
Community University Research Alliance (CURA)
June 3rd, 2004**

Presenters:

Doug House

Deputy Minister, Department of Innovation, Trade and Rural
Development

Alison Earle

Assistant Deputy Minister, Rural Secretariat

Discussants:

Penelope Rowe

CEO, Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador,
Director, *Values Added* Community University Research Alliance

Larry Felt

Professor, Memorial University,
Co-Director *Values Added* Community University Research Alliance

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Background Information

Community-University Research Alliance

Community University Research Alliance (CURA) is a multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral partnership that combines the strengths of academic and community-based researchers in creating a framework for research, knowledge generation and analysis.

The *Values Added* CURA is a collaborative research project led by the Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador (CSC), researchers from Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), other partners from Rural Secretariat (former Strategic Social Plan office), Human Resources Skills Development (HRSD) and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA). It is committed to building a foundation for collaborative research in Newfoundland and Labrador. The focus of *Values Added* research is on the policy shifts and environment created by the Strategic Social Plan (SSP).

The purposes of *Values Added* CURA are:

- to critically assess the processes related to, and the themes emanating from, the Strategic Social Plan;
- to explore the role and contributions of the voluntary, community-based sector in the unique environment created by the SSP based on collaboration, citizen engagement, and social capital; and
- to create a framework for research, knowledge generation, and analysis of related effects of deliberate policy shifts with collaborative government.

The *Values Added* CURA will:

- engage in consultation and planning activities to develop and support research objectives;
- expand the base of individuals and groups involved in the research process;
- share and validate research findings;
- support evidence-based decision-making; and
- add to the knowledge base about both the objectives of the SSP's principles and the related role and contributions of the voluntary, community-based sector.

The Strategic Social Plan

The Strategic Social Plan (SSP) was developed and released in 1998 under the previous government. This represented a deliberate shift in the province's approach to social policy, thereby providing a unique opportunity for research in the areas of policy formulation, collaborative relationships and program implementation.

The SSP was established as an "action framework focused on an integrated approach to social policy development and new alliances needed to incorporate community needs and priorities in social and economic programs affecting them." The Plan emphasizes the essential link between social and economic development, investing in people and building on community and regional strengths.

Development of the Rural Secretariat

In February 2004, five years after the release of the SSP, the newly elected government under Premier Danny Williams, announced the establishment of a Rural Secretariat, which would adopt some of the principles, and build on the strengths of the Strategic Social Plan. He stated, "I am pleased to report that government is establishing a new Rural Secretariat which builds on the framework of the Strategic Social Plan." He added, "the government has examined the existing Strategic Social Plan and reached the conclusion that the SSP's vision of healthy vibrant communities built on local strengths and capacities is complementary to the vision of the Rural Secretariat. The network of SSP regions, each with a steering committee comprised of energetic and representative stakeholders, and supported by a government secretariat, can be used as the basis for developing the Rural Secretariat."

The Rural Secretariat, in its adoption of SSP values, acknowledges the voluntary, community-based sector as both a vital contributor in community capacity building, a channel for citizen engagement, and as means for enriching people's lives. It also commits government to strengthen the sector's capacity to facilitate community development, provide input into the policymaking process, and participate in collaborative government.

Premier Williams described the role of the Rural Secretariat to:

- "promote sustainable economic and social development;
- conduct research and analysis of economic and social issues affecting rural Newfoundland and Labrador;
- ensure that rural concerns are considered throughout the provincial government and promoted at the federal level; and
- promote awareness of provincial and federal programs and services regarding rural communities."

By incorporating the SSP's principles and approaches, the Rural Secretariat continues to provide an opportunity for the multi-sectoral, multidisciplinary team of researchers with CURA to undertake innovative research on the impacts of SSP policies. These include new ways of doing business within government and collaborative governance through partnerships with regional agencies, communities, voluntary community-based organizations and citizens.

Given the Premier's announcement, the details related to the similarities and differences between Rural Secretariat and the Strategic Social Plan need to be understood.

Seminar: Understanding the Strategic Social Plan in the Framework of the New Rural Secretariat

The seminar held on June 3, 2004, was organized to provide a chance for those interested in research related to the concepts in the Strategic Social Plan. The intent was to explore the transformation of the Strategic Social Plan into the Rural Secretariat from an academic and community perspective. The purpose was to answer the question: Which SSP principles are the same and which are different under the new Rural Secretariat?

Participants were invited to the seminar as a result of their involvement or interest in social, economic, community or public policy research. It was held at the Business Administration Building, Memorial University.

An overview of issues related to the establishment of the Rural Secretariat was presented by Doug House, Deputy Minister, Department of Innovation, Trade and Rural Development. Alison Earle, Assistant Deputy Minister, Rural Secretariat presented an overview of the Rural Secretariat concepts as they related to the Strategic Social Plan. Penelope Rowe, CEO, Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador and Director of CURA, and Larry Felt, Professor, Department of Sociology, MUN and Co-Director of CURA were discussants and responded to the presentations from a CURA perspective.

PRESENTATIONS

Several themes emerged from the presentations by Doug House and Alison Earle. They can be categorized into main areas of: Planning the Rural Secretariat, Focus of the Rural Secretariat, Partnerships, and Research and Evidence as delineated in subsequent sections.

Planning the Rural Secretariat

Built on the Strengths of the Strategic Social Plan

There is an overlap in the ideas of the SSP and those of the Rural Secretariat. The new administration realizes the SSP process is in place and working well in many respects. Rather than create a new entity, the government will bring together the strengths of the SSP and the ideas of the Rural Secretariat. Currently, the original vision and goals of the SSP are adopted. Premier Williams has endorsed the components of the SSP vision referring to healthy, vibrant communities built on local strengths and capacities. The Rural Secretariat intends to be more encompassing and its mandate needs to be developed by building on the regional strengths of SSP, its organizations and other initiatives.

One Year Needed for Development

A detailed description of the relationship between the SSP and the Rural Secretariat could not be provided at this time. There will be a transition year to move from the Strategic Social Plan to the Rural Secretariat.

A Central Agency of Government

The Minister of Innovation, Trade and Rural Development, Hon. Kathy Dunderdale, is responsible for the Rural Secretariat. The Rural Secretariat is housed, however, in Executive Council working under the direction of the Clerk of the Executive Council. This allows the Rural Secretariat to address crosscutting issues related to rural development within government, from a central agency perspective.

Consultations.

The Rural Secretariat needs to be built into a strong agency, with trust being a contributing factor in its success. This requires assistance from all parties involved. In creating the vision of the Rural Secretariat, regional meetings are held by the Minister and Deputy Minister of the Department of Innovation, Trade and Rural Development. As many people as possible are included, and there are plans for more consultations and engagement of people.

Focus of the Rural Secretariat

A Rural Lens

The Rural Secretariat will focus on issues through a rural lens. Special attention will be paid to rural issues, as urban areas require less immediate attention, but will continue to be part of the process. There will be an emphasis on youth. The involvement of the community-based sector and the social economy needs to be defined.

Social and Economic Development Integrated

The SSP included an approach that linked social and economic development. It recognized that social and economic development cannot happen in isolation and stronger linkages between economic and social development will be established.

In the “Blue Book” (the PC’s election policy document), thinking around the Rural Secretariat was about coordination of social and economic development among government departments and agencies. The creation of the Rural Secretariat is meant to bring social and economic development issues together to be dealt with jointly. There is a belief within the new government that healthy communities and a healthy economy coincide. The Minister responsible for the Rural Secretariat is committed to the integration of social and economic policy; particularly the integration of policies aimed at education, employment and labor force development.

An integrated social and economic plan will be developed based on lessons learned provincially, nationally and internationally. Social and economic development can be measured.

Economic Development Emphasized

There are serious economic development challenges in Newfoundland and Labrador, particularly in rural Newfoundland. The Conservative policies from the “Blue Book” are used as a guide to economic growth in the province. These policies placed an emphasis on economic development in their election platform through a two-pronged approach: balancing the public budget and supporting economic development. Real jobs and real wealth needs to be created, coinciding with a move away from dependence on EI.

Focus on Long-term Solutions

The SSP was a catalyst for change and new ways of thinking but real change takes time. There continues to be a need to focus on long-term solutions. Best practices need positive reinforcement to become new ways of doing business.

Partnerships

Collaboration Between Federal and Provincial Government

Although attempts at formal integration of Federal and Provincial arrangements have resulted in limited success, there is a commitment to continue informal collaboration and agreements between the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and the Department of Innovation, Trade and Rural Development. The Rural Secretariat would capitalize on such arrangements, as it is intended to be a collaborative approach, building upon the SSP.

Voluntary, Community-Based Sector Role to be Defined

In response to a question by P. Rowe related to the role of the voluntary community-based sector, the presenters indicated that government needs advice on how best to integrate the voluntary, community-based sector into the Rural Secretariat. A research/discussion paper on the sector would be helpful that describes its social and economic impact, the amount of employment in the sector, its operation, the work it performs and its contribution to social and economic development in the province. The paper could also provide advice on better ways for government to work with the sector. The research should allow input from individuals directly involved in this sector who are familiar with the issues related to the role and potential of the sector in social and economic development.

External Government Partnerships Essential

Government as a whole needs to become more supportive of the efforts of people in communities. The SSP includes government and community working together; an approach that values and builds on community strengths. The Rural Secretariat will continue the SSP approach of external collaboration. It will support and encourage the work of the Regional Committees and assist in the development of cooperative, collaborative partnerships. The regional process is intended to enable people in rural areas to have direct access to government policy making. The process will attempt to bring the community into government, possibly through a central advisory committee. The current Steering Committee membership is being reviewed to maximize effectiveness. Within government there will continue to be involvement of stakeholders in policy and program development.

New Advisory Committee

An advisory board to the Rural Secretariat, consisting of members of the Regional Steering Committees and the Regional Economic Development Boards has been proposed to ensure greater collaboration and community involvement and allow for greater input from representatives of community interests. The Premier's Council on Social Development is also being reviewed, to bring its function more into accord with the objectives of social and economic development.

Formal Mechanisms to be Established for Partnerships Among Departments

Departments must work collaboratively and improve their coordination efforts. Within government, the Rural Secretariat will continue the SSP approach of internal collaboration and sharing of resources to tackle problems will be promoted. Government departments will make stronger commitments to more collaborative partnerships, and formal mechanisms will be established to promote collaboration on social and economic development issues across government departments. Coordinating services and sharing resources makes sense.

Research and Evidence

Evidence-Based Decision-Making in the Rural Secretariat

Evidence-based decision-making is slowly making its way into government and there is growing recognition that evidence is needed to make sound decisions. Within government, the Rural Secretariat will continue to support and advance the use of evidence in decision-making and the Community Accounts (CA). The CA will work with partners to continue the development and use of social and economic indicators and the measurement of outcomes. Some provinces and partners in Ireland have shown interest in the development of the Community Accounts and the social audit.

Research Important Component of New Approach

There is a need to engage in more discussion in the Rural Secretariat on research needs. Research will be part of the process and there is an opportunity for entities such as CURA, the Community Services Council (CSC), Centre of Regional Development Studies (CORDS) and the Public Policy Research Centre at MUN to feed into the process. Community-based research could be an approach used as it mobilizes communities by involving them in research design, planning using findings and moving communities, institutions and government to action. CURA can help break away from notions of hiring consultants and involve community in the research as this results in better outcomes such as the advancement of learning when people are genuinely involved in the process.

Community Participation in Research

A focus needs to be placed on business retention and expansion. We need to understand the needs of small business in rural regions Communities and Regional Economic Development Boards need to be involved and participate in research.

DISCUSSANTS' RESPONSES

The following themes emerged from the responses of Penelope Rowe and Larry Felt to the presentations by Doug House and Alison Earle.

Relationship between the SSP and the Rural Secretariat needs clarification

There is a need to understand where the SSP fits in the Rural Secretariat, what principles of it remain intact and the way it will evolve through the Rural Secretariat. Another question to consider is where urban areas of the province fit in terms of the concepts in the Strategic Social Plan that may be adopted by the Rural Secretariat.

Understanding of the voluntary, community-based sector's role in Rural Secretariat

The role of the voluntary community-based sector in the Rural Secretariat and in program delivery throughout government, which was specific in the SSP, needs to be defined. The role of other structures in the SSP such as NGOs also needs definition. For example: Will the only structures be regional and will any structures be changed? How could the private, non-profit and public sectors be linked?

The voluntary, community-based sector plays a significant role in the labour market

The VCBS are not all volunteers; the sector employs 15 to 20% of the labour force working in social and economic development and diversification. It was suggested that since newer Newfoundland and Labrador data will soon be available from Stats Canada on non-profit organizations, this might form the basis of a report.

Clarification needed on principles/direction of Rural Secretariat

The principles related to internal government issues in the SSP also need clarification; consistency across departmental policy development for example. The role of target groups, youth and leadership development for example, also need clarification.

Many Diverse Reasons for Research

Much research is needed. The reasons for doing research are diverse e.g. 1) to help communities 2) curiosity about an issue 3) academic publications 4) informing public policy and building knowledge. In view of the fact that we all share the desire to move the province forward as stated in the vision of the SSP, better networks and synergies are needed in the area of research.

Building Partnerships on Research Important

CURA has a willingness to build partnerships to undertake research by drawing together the community, academics and government. For example, research could be undertaken to look for new and imaginative indicators for evidence-based decision-making. CURA partnerships are also being built between government and communities. Joint planning on research priorities has been done and synergies are being developed to help one another define concepts and harness complimentary resources to make this a better place to live.

CURA's Emphasis on Researching New Government-Community Processes

The Strategic Social Plan placed the province in the Canadian forefront related to ground up decision-making. Research is needed to better define new processes that will be adopted from the SSP by the Rural Secretariat. CURA is a good vehicle to complete research to inform new processes and approaches to social and economic development flowing from the SSP.

Training on research and using evidence in decision-making is essential

Research skills are needed. A seminar on data mining and a workshop on evidence-based decision-making are planned for the Fall by CURA. The same data can be used to make things look very different so the interpretation of data means different things in accordance with a variety of disciplines.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK ON RURAL SECRETARIAT

This is a collection of comments and themes emerging from not only the seminar focus but also the subsequent open dialogue and discussion. While some are not directly related to the theme of the seminar, they were relevant issues for the attendees around the Rural Secretariat.

Social development should be maintained

Social and economic thinking needs to ensure that the social side is prominent. Comparing us to Ireland may not be useful as there are many social problems there, e.g. increases in family violence. In addition, the changes to the SSP may cause government to have problems with trust. It may difficult for government to have people trust and accept the idea of making decisions together, as many feel advice given in the past was not taken. Ultimately, social and economic policy-making needs to include people.

Economic development needs to be included

There is value in collapsing silos but we also need to understand their necessity. It is understood the Rural Secretariat needs to focus on both social and economic development, and ultimately, community development. The presentation was focused around social development; where is the economic agenda?

Consultation is necessary to develop the Rural Secretariat

There are concerns about the process intended to be used to shape the Rural Secretariat. The Rural Secretariat needs to consult and pay attention to voiced concerns and comments. Communities need to become involved, and people want opportunities to engage and partner on solutions. The change process started 8 months ago and people are concerned. It is very important that what communities' needs and wants are understood through a collaborative process. Moreover, the input of people who were involved in the SSP should be included.

Urban issues should also be addressed

The Community Accounts now have neighbourhood data. Much information was gathered on urban development in areas and neighbourhoods (e.g. aging, poverty, housing prices). It indicates some problems (e.g. poverty) in urban neighbourhoods are as bad as rural communities. It must be realized that cities have many issues and we need to plan for these urban problems.

Research should be relevant to communities

In the Labrador area, people feel like “fish in a fish bowl”. They should be informed of the potential value of research and evaluation to them, asked their needs and provided with the results.

Rebuilding trust is necessary

Concerns were voiced over a breach of the trust of those committed to the SSP vision with this new emphasis on economic rather than social development.

Efforts of rural communities need support

One objective of the Rural Secretariat is for government as a whole to become more supportive of the efforts of people in communities. In reaction, it was suggested that the greater need is to “bring government into the community”; that is, to have government support the communities in developing themselves. Other concerns were voiced over a perception that the Provincial government is attempting to “save” rural Newfoundland and Labrador, when in fact rural citizens desire support in leading the development of their own communities.

Those using evidence and undertaking research require skills

Representatives of the economic zones voiced concerns over the inability of community leaders to conduct community-based research, or to have effective research conducted for them by government. If the Community Accounts are to reach their full potential, community leaders, individuals and organizations around the province must be given the skills to utilize them effectively. It was suggested that better training be provided to enable community leaders to carry out research themselves. More collaboration and effort should be made to ensure research findings are more comprehensible to the general public.

There was also an open dialogue on examples of issues in many areas of the province that require attention and could be addressed by the Rural Secretariat.

As an example, in the Port aux Basques area: out-migration is high, municipalities do not have economic development officers, people are financially secure but parents are sometimes working away from home with extended families looking after their children, there are problems with youth, services are not located in the area and people have lost hope about the future.

It was stated that research often conducted by contracted consultants who develop proposals are often rejected. In Port aux Basques area, there are negative impacts of initiatives on community volunteers. Citizens need to be involved in research but there has been no interaction between the community and the contracted consultants.

In Labrador, the highway was constructed but will be closed for 7 months of the year. The ferry from Goose Bay to Cartwright has returned to a Lewisport to Cartwright route. People are losing income as tourism infrastructure was built based on alternate ferry route as tourists are not coming from Goose Bay. Many are now planning to leave as a result. Little consideration was given to the spin-off effects of decisions that are being made about rural areas.

Essentially, an open dialogue is needed and the Rural Secretariat needs to address these issues.

Conclusion

Although the seminar was designed to determine which SSP principles are the same and those that are different under the new Rural Secretariat, the details on this had not been decided. It is expected a year is needed before all the details will be developed and available. Therefore, the relationship between the SSP and the Rural Secretariat continues to require clarification. It was claimed, however, that the Rural Secretariat is to be built on the strengths of the Strategic Social Plan and the principles of the SSP in general appear to have been carried into the Rural Secretariat. Consultations will be held which will further influence the development of the Secretariat.

Like the Strategic Social Plan, the Rural Secretariat remains within a central agency of government. This allows the Secretariat to lead the rural development process within government by coordinating responses across departments. In view of the fact that a social and economic plan focused on long-term solutions will be developed, this centralized role enables a more integrated approach to implementation.

While much of the focus of the Rural Secretariat is expected to focus on economic development, social development objectives must be maintained to successfully develop rural areas. The efforts of rural communities need to be supported to enhance the development of rural areas, and urban development will also need to be addressed. Trust needs to be built in order to work with people and organizations in communities. This will help to ensure people do not see an erosion of the SSP but a superior approach with the SSP strengthened through a rural and economic focus.

Partnerships continue to be a central feature of the new Rural Secretariat. This includes working with citizens and communities, collaboration with the voluntary, community-based sector, cooperation across provincial government departments and collaboration between the federal and provincial governments. The voluntary, community-based sector plays a significant role as a provider of programs and services; an employer of a significant proportion of the labour force and a local planning and implementation mechanism for social and economic development. An understanding of the role of the voluntary, community-based sector in Rural Secretariat is therefore, of utmost importance.

The evidence-based decision-making approach in the Strategic Social Plan remains a key feature of the Rural Secretariat. Moreover, research is an important component of the Secretariat. Building partnerships with communities to participate in research is important to ensure relevance of research to communities. CURA's emphasis on researching new government-community processes can help determine the processes that are needed in carrying out research.

Appendix A

Rural Secretariat Seminar Participants

Presenters:

Doug House, Deputy Minister, Department of Innovation, Trade and Rural Development

Alison Earle, Assistant Deputy Minister, Rural Secretariat

Discussants:

Penny Rowe, Chief Executive Officer, Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador/Director, *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

Larry Felt, Professor, Department of Sociology, Memorial University / Co-Director, *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

Participants:

Gerald **Alexander**, Provincial Coordinator, Health Canada

Jeanette **Andrews**, Executive Director, Association of Registered Nurses Newfoundland and Labrador

Sonya **Belben**, Board Member, Newfoundland and Labrador Regional Economic Development Board Association

Victoria **Belbin**, Executive Director, Newfoundland and Labrador Regional Economic Development Board Association

Allison **Catmur**, Graduate Student, Memorial University / *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

David **Close**, Professor, Political Science Department, Memorial University / *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

Pam **Corrigan**, Coordinator, www.envision.ca, Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador

Barbara **Cox**, Director, Office of Research, Memorial University

Kenny **Curlew**, Research - Administrative Assistant, *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

Shirley P. **Dawe**, Analyst, Policy and Coordination, Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency / *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

Brendan **Doyle**, Board Member, Newfoundland and Labrador Regional Economic Development Board Association

Peggy **Earle**, Nursing Consultant, Association of Registered Nurses Newfoundland and Labrador

Jamilee **Fitzpatrick**, Regional Planner, Avalon SSP Steering Committee

Catherine **French**, Coordinator, Newfoundland and Labrador Canada Volunteerism Initiative Network, Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador

Gary **Gorman**, Dean, Faculty of Business Administration, Memorial University

Paul **Green**, Manager, Strategic Services, Human Resources Skill Development Canada

Joyce **Hancock**, President, Advisory Council on the Status of Women

Ed Hayden, Director of Policy, Planning and Evaluation, Department Human Resources, Labour and Employment

Heather Hillier, Regional Planner, Central SSP Steering Committee

Colin Holloway, Regional Planner, Eastern SSP Steering Committee

Gillian Janes, Regional Planner, Northeast Avalon SSP Steering Committee

Calvin Manning, Board Member, Newfoundland and Labrador Regional Economic Development Board Association

Mary Marshall, Chief Operating Officer, Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation

Axel Meisen, President, Memorial University

Ryan Norman, Research Assistant, *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

Judy Pardy, Board Member, Newfoundland and Labrador Regional Economic Development Board Association

Patti Powers, Research Associate, *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

Bob Richards, Associate Professor, Faculty of Business Administration, Memorial University

Kathryn Rowsell, Executive Director, Women in Successful Employment / Northeast Avalon SSP Steering Committee

Dana Spurrell, Manager, Rural Secretariat / *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

Michelle Sullivan, Research/Evaluation, Aspen & Oakes / *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

Alicia Sutton, Regional Planner, Labrador SSP Steering Committee

Adrian Tanner, Retired Professor, Memorial University / *Values-Added* Community-University Research Alliance

David Vardy, Director, Institute of Public Policy, Memorial University

Sean Wiltshire, Chief Executive Officer, Avalon Employment Inc. / Capital Coast Development Alliance