



INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN SMALL CITIES AND TOWNS:



NEW DIRECTIONS AND INNOVATIVE LOCAL PRACTICES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Although we often think of international cooperation as the domain of large multinational organizations, there are plenty of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) scattered throughout British Columbia's small cities and towns that do meaningful work on international issues. Past research, however, has largely focused on the experiences of organizations in large urban centres and not on the values and needs of those in small cities and towns.

In this research, we wanted to find out about **the experiences of NGOs engaged in international cooperation in the context of British Columbia's small cities and towns**. How do they consider their work in a provincial, national, and international context? What are some of the strengths and challenges of being in a small city? And what are some of the innovative and promising practices going on there? This is an important area of study because the lessons learned from **community-based international cooperation strategies may inform future programming in BC and in other small cities across Canada**. The results of the study will also support Canadian public engagement in international development.

Researchers held one-on-one and group interviews in three communities: Nelson, Prince George and Comox. **We conducted 15 interviews and three focus groups**. Audio recordings of the interviews were sent to the University of Calgary, where they were transcribed and analysed with qualitative analysis software. This analysis was supported by two literature reviews – one of academic peer-reviewed articles and one of grey literature.

Our findings show that international cooperation NGOs and practitioners in small cities and town across BC contextualize their work around five major themes:

- 1 Connectedness:**
individual and group connections are easier to make in small town settings and are often steeped in direct personal relationships that promote trust and partnerships;
- 2 Capacity Building:**
education and raising awareness through public engagement, with post-secondary institutions playing a major role, creates opportunities at the local level;
- 3 Local-Global Connection:**
local definitions of international development are influenced by local issues and a local interpretation of the role social justice plays in how the connection is understood;
- 4 Tools and Strategies for Community Action:**
the internet and social media, community activities and fundraising play big roles in supporting and amplifying international cooperation efforts in small towns; and
- 5 Community Challenges:**
small town practitioners often feel cut off from resources and opportunities due to their size and location.



From these findings and from other outreach BCCIC was conducting throughout the region, we were able to identify **five promising practices** for international cooperation NGOs in small towns and cities:

- 1 Needs-based programming that reflects the diversity of needs in a community, from planning to implementation;**
- 2 Cross-sectoral collaboration with a range of partners, including interfaith groups, government, the private sector, and Indigenous Peoples, among others;**
- 3 Intergenerational collaboration and youth involvement around meaningful issues to raise awareness among the next generation of practitioners;**
- 4 Amplification of efforts through internet and social media engagement to support community activities and fundraising efforts;**
- 5 Alignment with an international framework such as the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals as a unifying structure to connect local efforts with global practices.***

This work is one of the first to qualitatively analyze the experiences of British Columbians working in global engagement within small communities. We saw a rich and diverse set of experiences and perspectives emerge that will lend themselves to further study of promising practices in global cooperation. We expect that these findings will improve the capacity of organizations to learn from their experiences and to share their lessons with others. We also anticipate that policy-makers, educators and trainers, organizations and development practitioners will be able to incorporate some of the successful practices into their daily operations.

* From 2015-2016, with funding from Global Affairs Canada (formerly the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development), BCCIC conducted an extensive series of 29 roundtable consultations across 5 regions in BC, meeting with over 400 individuals around the themes of Canadian and international sustainability. We found that participants in our roundtables – often individuals and organizations in small towns and cities – supported the use of the SDGs as a common language tool for linking, contextualizing and positioning the work of Canadian civil society organizations.

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