

RESEARCH BRIEF

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN SMALL CITIES AND TOWNS:

NEW DIRECTIONS AND INNOVATIVE LOCAL PRACTICES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Background:

Past research on international cooperation in Canada has focused on large urban centres, with far less attention to small cities and towns. Yet international cooperation NGOs are actively engaged in creating partnerships in many of these communities, including Northern sites, in a long-term and sustainable manner. There is a need to better understand how these local organizations consider their work in a provincial, national, and international context, particularly since the challenges facing international development remain varied and complex.

The goal of this research study is to advance knowledge in international cooperation by exploring the experiences of civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and related stakeholder groups in British Columbia's (BC) small cities and towns. Small cities and towns in this research are defined as those with a population between 10,000 and 90,000.

Methodology:

The qualitative study used participatory action research (PAR) methodology conducted in three different communities in British Columbia and included 15 in-depth interviews and three focus groups of 3-8 participants per session. Transcriptions of the interview recordings were analysed with the qualitative research software Nvivo 10.0 based on a grounded theory approach to guide data analyses and interpretations using open coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for developing categories and themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This analysis was supported by two literature reviews – one of academic peer-reviewed work and one of grey literature.

Results:

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.***

References:

1. Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
2. Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.

* 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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