

# Two Models Of Community Development

January 2011

As many of you know, I wear a number of different hats in my professional, community and personal lives. Our background as growers of most of the food our family eats has provided me with a way of looking at the world of community development that I would like to share with you.

We are organic farmers and as such see our task as identifying the soil's natural strengths and composting natural materials to enhance it. We look to grow plants that marry well with the local soil and climate environment. This is how gardening and farming worked before people began to take shortcuts based on modern chemical imitators of natural conditions such as we find in concentrations of chemical fertilizers.

Modern agriculture sees the soil as the medium that carries a chemical soup introduced to the plants by saturating the soil with it. This method allows us to grow plants rapidly for as long as we are willing to keep feeding them the chemical soup but risks compounding weaknesses by simultaneously depleting the soil of its ability to compost on its own. It discourages the growth of a huge variety of natural bacteria that could otherwise break down the soil and feed the plants. When the fertilizer is stopped, the soil is burned out.

What does this have to do with community development? Well, the two methods have close analogies with the way community groups are nurtured and grow in our society.

The first, organic, method is where individuals or small groups perceive a need for an action or a service and organize themselves to learn more, to develop a plan, to call on volunteers for their expertise and to begin to provide the action or service, working from the grassroots. Small amounts of funding will reward these initiatives and if it is indeed valued by the community, more people will be drawn into the group to help it grow and flourish. Over the years we have seen many such groups form in our society. A great example here in our own community is the Cancer Support Group which was created when an individual fighting cancer began talking with friends and neighbours about their experiences and felt the need for a more formal organization to provide information, help and support to cancer patients and their families and caregivers.

By contrast, we all know the long, painful story of Alliance Quebec. Created originally as a means of directing funding to regional organizations and chapters through an umbrella group, over time the funding took precedence, trying to imagine and create what was needed and effectively out-competing small local initiatives. In the end, when the funding was cut, we were all faced with the task of starting over, and dealing with a lot of burnout. This kind of top-down stimulus finds a strong analogy in our chemical-dependent modern agricultural techniques.

Watching the way funding of English community organizations is evolving, I fear that we risk repeating the same errors. The methods by which the federal government funds the minority community needs to be re-examined and we must insist that this kind of funding be directed to help spontaneous, small local initiatives rather than be used to try to imagine how we should do things on the ground. We must develop a means of better qualifying how to help existing community groups and give all our priority to those initiatives. The alternative, trying to imagine what should exist and creating it from the top down is doomed to failure and will only result in burnout and a loss of credibility.

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