



Youth in Community Economic Development
Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-op



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Strengthening Canada's Communities / Des communautés plus fortes au Canada

Youth in Community Economic Development

Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-op

This profile is one of fifteen stories examining youth involvement in community economic development (CED). The profiles have been produced as part of the Canadian CED Network's efforts to encourage effective practices in youth leadership and engagement to enhance the social and economic conditions of Canada's communities.

This work was supported by Coast Capital Savings Credit Union, the Muttart Foundation, Social Development Canada, and Industry Canada.

The Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-op is a community centre where youth from Saskatoon's core neighbourhoods have the opportunity to become involved in economic ventures with co-operative and environmental themes. The youth are involved in a working co-operative in which their ideas provide the inspiration for work projects and they share the profits earned by these projects.ⁱ "What makes this program unique is the level of youth involvement in decision-making; from generating ideas to implementing new programs there is a sense of ownership among the youth. This participatory approach nurtures leadership development and is a cornerstone in the success of CNYC."ⁱⁱ

CNYC has gone through some significant changes over the past eight months. With the arrival of the new director the goal of the organization has changed slightly, and the organization is in the process of developing even more youth inclusive processes and programs. The overall goal of CNYC is to empower youth through the dignity of paid employment.

Context

Keith Jorgenson of CNYC summed up the context for us. "CNYC is situated in the inner city, and is somewhat similar to the downtown eastside of Vancouver. There are however additional challenges. There are no "First Employers" in the community, organizations that provide entry-level employment for youth. Most young people don't have any transportation, and no real culture of work in their families. Both of these combine for an environment that does not offer easy-access to first employment."

The reputation of the core neighbourhoods of Saskatoon is a complicated one. The level of poverty is higher than other areas of the city, there are no local grocery stores, and few resources for young people who do not fit easily into the system. The attention that the core

neighbourhoods receive from the media or outside sources tends to be negative attention, though there are positive and dynamic things going on in the community that are not recognized. "Likewise, attitudes shaped by this negative attention can further depress local residents' assessment of their neighbourhood and themselves and the willingness of other residents to live or invest in the area."ⁱⁱⁱ

In an effort to reverse this negative spiral, and in order to address specific concerns in a self-reliant manner, area residents came together to form several action groups in the early 1990's. By 1995, these groups were discussing poverty reduction strategies. After a workshop devoted to Community Economic Development, citizens came to recognize CED as a vehicle for taking control of their social and economic well-being.^{iv} (Quint)

The demographics give one perspective of what is happening in the core neighbourhoods, according to numbers, but it leaves out other important aspects, like art and diversity of the population.

The East is wealthy, whereas the west has a lot of poverty – yet it's very vibrant, I'm really glad I work here. The Core is a complicated place, there's a lot more to it than the poverty.

— Allysha, Staff at CNYC

History

Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-op is a place where young people in Riversdale go for their first job but find a lot more than just a job flipping burgers or sweeping a floor.

— Word on the Street Newsletter, published by CNYC youth

"CNYC was established in 1996 as a result of Riversdale community members' vision to create a community-based organization to address self-sufficiency, co-operative principles, and environmentalism. Two current Saskatoon Environmentors' Co-operative Ltd. (SEC) board members were instrumental in establishing CNYC. Rusty Chartier, a retired police officer, and Owen Fortosky, a schoolteacher, had both been involved in co-operative movements for much of their lives. Both also grew up in the core area.

Quint Development Corporation (Quint) was the community economic development body for the Riversdale area that undertook management of CNYC, as funding was not yet available. After six months, Quint

stepped down as the managing body and Lenore Swystun was hired to run CNYC.

Since establishment, CNYC has adhered to several key principles. For example, the SEC Board of Directors has aimed at ensuring that CNYC is at least partially self-sustaining. To this end, CNYC does not accept government money to pay kids for their attendance and work. A second CNYC principle is that the co-op is run by the children participating (those paid for their work), and employees, not volunteers.

CNYC continues to grow as a groundbreaking, progressive community-based organization. With strong community support, CNYC has successfully attracted

Selected Core Neighbourhood Demographics

Annual family income (\$32,475) is less than the City average (\$62,451), with over 40% of families living on less than \$20,000 per year.

Unemployment and social assistance rates are higher than the rest of the City.

Shelter costs consume a higher proportion of take home income.

The ratio of renters to homeowners is higher than in other parts of the City.

Few employment opportunities exist for Aboriginal People, whose populations range from twenty-seven to forty-four percent in the various neighbourhoods (average Aboriginal family income in the core neighbourhoods is \$16,497).¹

(Quint)

youth from the core neighbourhood, to participate in their own worker co-operative where they have learned useful skills, acquired valuable experience, contributed to the community, and earned money for themselves.”^v

Activities in CED

CNYC provides a place where measures can be taken to keep youth out of the social justice system. Participants learn how to operate a co-operative business by working on group-initiated environmental projects. They also benefit directly from revenue generated by these projects.

— Tupone, p.5

The target group of CNYC is mainly at-risk youth in downtown Saskatoon. The original focus of the Co-op was more on younger children and short-term community projects like making compost bins. The focus has now shifted more to skill building, working with teens, and building trust. The Co-op runs a number of projects to teach skills and provide an income for their work. These programs include a carpentry shop, monthly newsletters organized, written and published by the young people, and gardening and lawn care in the summer months. The programs are designed to build not only technical skills, but also team building skills, community and inclusive-decision-making skills and community awareness. In addition the new director, Keith Jorgenson, has initiated a school credit recognition program that sets the young people up to receive academic credit for the work that they're doing.

In the carpentry program, the young people learn the skills necessary, build the items, sell them and then get paid. The young staff directing this program are also encouraging the participants to take further initiative and leadership around the items built and painted. This pushes further learning, as it is necessary to take the market and competitive aspects into account because this program is a social enterprise.

CNYC has started a monthly newsletter called *Word on the Street* that have become a forum for youth to discuss issues of youth in the core neighbourhood. The young people are encouraged to not only write articles but to become columnists. This means that they need to organize ahead of time to prepare for each publication, and that they have control over the direction and information included. There is revenue generated from this effort as well.

We want young people to work as columnists as we would prefer if they proposed their own ideas. Because of the ownership of it by the youth the newsletter feels very genuine. People are writing about serious things like crystal meth – it's a serious problem here - and there are a lot of gang problems too. These are the articles that young people are writing. These kids know what it's like, their experiences are very valuable...

— Allysha, CNYC

Keith Jorgenson and Allysha Larsen talk describe the community credit program. “The vast majority of the youth in the co-op are out of school. Therefore a community credit program with the local Catholic School Division was created. This means that there is access to school credits for youth that are doing work of a scholastic nature in the community. Examples of credits vary; we also manage kids at other sites, doing work that contributes to credits from health to art to phys Ed to math to native studies... Through the carpentry program you can get industrial arts credits, or by writing for the newsletter you can receive credits in journalism. There is a teacher's assistant that will work one on one with those who want to finish high school. The programs goal is to either link these kids back into the school system or into employment.”

It's so easy to get lost in the system. The Co-op is giving people an opportunity to get back to school or to get their credits outside of school if they want. This then sets people up with work, builds their skills, puts a job on

their resume, and can potentially get them back into school.

— Allysha, CNYC

There is an organic gardening program that runs alongside nutrition training. The organization has set up a nutrition mentorship program for teens to come in to work with CNYC, and to help present to school groups that come to visit. Allysha talks about the program:

“Young people are learning from young people about healthy habits. In the core there aren't any grocery stores so people end up going Giant Tiger to buy food. There's a serious problem with type 2 diabetes. Also, this place started as an environmental co-op, so it's also hopefully making a difference with providing people with food in a hands-on way. People could make food together and then bring it together so they get a sense of connection.”

Youth Inclusion in CED

The target audience of CNYC is 14-19 years old. The majority of the members are in the 15-18 year old range, with a few people on the outside edges of that. There are a lot of First Nations participants and as they tend to have a more global view of what youth means there is some flexibility around participation based on age.

The Board of the Co-op is incorporated, meaning that all members have to be 18 or older, so there are no youth participants on the board. There is an age requirement for the Board because boards have a legal responsibility, so members need to be of age to hold a position. Approximately three out of the eight board members are under the age of thirty-five, and all of the staff working at the co-op are under thirty-five. There is a plan to have a youth advisory committee, but because the Co-op is in the middle of a move of location, there hasn't been the opportunity to spend enough time on that yet.

CNYC offers a unique experience for core neighbourhood youth. Youth between the ages of 5 and 18 can participate in CNYC programs and activities throughout the year.

Their participation is not dependent on previous experience or skill levels, only a willingness to participate in CNYC programs.

— Tupone, p.16

Though the staff of CNYC are all young themselves, they are still concerned and committed to making sure that there are even higher levels of involvement of their youth participants in the decision-making and program development of the organization. The newsletter is already very youth-driven, but the carpentry program is much more consumer-driven, meaning less choice by the members as to what items are built.

I don't have a lot of illusions about why the kids come here. It is a very hard to mouth existence that most of our youth live. We pay them at the end of a shift. If we didn't do so, if we switched to a weekly or monthly basis, it wouldn't work. It's about the immediacy. That said, I know that the kids enjoy the space and they feel good about themselves.

— Keith Jorgenson

Keith considers the direction that CNYC is moving in terms of youth inclusion. “We're at some baby steps in terms of youth involvement. The plan is to have youth more meaningfully involved, particularly around newsletter. Currently they write everything and we assist them in editing for grammar, but not for style. We don't touch the style because it's much more powerful for other young people to hear people speaking with their voice. I'm also a firm believer that we don't want to ask young people to be involved out of tokenism, or to not give them the tools they need to be meaningfully involved. We want to build the capacity in them to be able to meaningfully get involved in the decisions that are made.”

The staff have found that the young people get engaged with CNYC for a variety of

reasons, from very basic reasons like the chance to earn money or enjoyment of the space and community, to more complex reasons like the opportunity to build strong relationships and friendships, or of finding an environment that will engage when other systems have let you fall through the cracks.

A lot of teens in the Core drop out and just don't go to school, they become so marginalized, they slip out of the system. It's so common not to go to school here, so many young people just don't go. But it doesn't mean that they don't want to work or be engaged - they're here before me in the morning! There are young people that want to be engaged but they're not finding that engagement in school.

— Allysha Larsen

CNYC is an informal space where young people can come and feel at home – partly due, according to the staff, to the crazy old building they are currently based out of. That environment will change soon as the Co-op moves into its new space, yet they hope that it will remain informal – it will just be cleaner!

Allysha talks about the environment they try to create at the co-op. “We try to make everyone feel welcome, it is not a space to be judged, we don't turn anyone away. The members become our friends; they fit in and feel valued and welcomed. Maybe it was different at school. Here we welcome everyone, there is a sense of not being judged, of being appreciated for the work that one does, with constructive criticism offered. Instead of criticizing though, we tend to praise what is done well. There is a real focus to praise. The young people tend to bring their sibling and friends, and even bring other family members.”

Outcomes and Evaluation

The breadth, depth and overall quality of experience that CNYC offers cannot be matched within the Saskatoon area. Many community members support CNYC, and as awareness of the organization grows, so too

will the community support.

—Tupone, p.16

As the direction of the organization has changed significantly in the past eight months it is difficult to see recorded outcomes, yet informal observation points to a significant impact upon participants.

According to Keith, “We certainly do see in the short term that both paid employment and work place based training makes a significant impact on people's lives. As soon as somebody has a legitimate source of income, confidence and achievement on a number of levels seem to spill into other parts of their life. Most of the kids that we get have criminal records when they arrive; some are referred through John Howard society. I don't know of a kid who's gotten back entangled in difficulty after coming to our co-op for a while.”

Another aspect of the Co-op that has had a profound social impact has been the learning of the social skills needed in a successful employee, rather than just the actual technical skills. Keith said, “Many of the young people coming to work at the co-op are part of families where there is no culture of work, meaning that they usually haven't witnessed any of their extended family going to work each day, nor are there the discussions with parents or other mentors about employment and expectations with their parents.”

Success Factors and Lessons Learned

There is a lot of learning happening at CNYC, on a number of different levels. There is learning at the technical level, specifics of the carpentry or academic credit program level, and at the social inclusion level. There is learning in the larger picture, how the various hard and soft skills exchanged at the co-op contribute to not only the participants' lives, but to the larger community. And there is recognition that at the systemic level many of the CNYC co-op members are being left behind, yet find a new space to engage and learn at the co-op.

One of the practical lessons learned for this Co-op is the necessity of paying out at the end of each day of work, instead of on a weekly, bi-monthly or monthly basis. Because of the particular environment of the core community, the economic needs play a significant role in any activity or commitment. Keith goes into more detail. "We pay out at the end of each day, something that is actually quite crucial to keeping kids coming back because they are living a somewhat hand-to-mouth existence. We actually have quite an economic footprint in the community - \$25000 gets paid out over the year."

For the staff, learning to network and make partnerships has been crucial. Part of this communication with other groups and organizations began because of funding requirements to partner with other community groups in order to receive funding, but the benefits of partnering have already been felt. Allysha thinks that the co-op and its staff are learning a lot about partnerships. "Groups need to be working together; there are many of us aiming to alleviate poverty, to build skills and to bring about more equity amongst people. I'm learning about how people could be pooling their resources more, and where creative connections can be made."

One of the success factors of CNYC is that it has identified a gap in the system, and is now working to include young people who need an alternative route to participate, learn and engage with the community. "Practical skills, cooperation, and self-sufficiency are goals on which CNYC focuses. Programs and activities seek to encourage youth to work co-operatively, while teaching practical skills that increase self-sufficiency. Many of these principles are not being addressed in either the education system or other organizations." (Tupone, p.12)

Policy and Future Directions

CNYC has many actions it hopes to act on in the future. As noted in the Lessons Learned, the Co-op is eager to make

Lessons Learned

This is a worker co-op, where people make money, but it's an alternative learning space too- so much happens under the radar! There's a lot going on that is informal but it's learning nonetheless, it's still skill building. It's hard to fit into the system, especially if you're poor or don't have access or opportunity.

— Allysha, CNYC

On one occasion, some kids got into a fight at the market booth they had set up, and they didn't understand why that was problematic. "There wasn't anyone there at moment, so why is this a big deal?" That's the largest barrier, that of not having the social skills and the understanding of what an employer demands of them in a workplace environment. That is the largest deficit to being employed, even more than the literacy skill level or lack of degree.

— Keith, CNYC

If you want kids to feel good about what they are creating and producing you have to give them the skill to produce something of quality, something that is wanted by consumers.

— Keith, CNYC

Often in the education system we use the method of "let's pretend." For example, that somebody is actually going to read what you are writing about, or buy what you are making - that there's a consumer for the product you're creating. But the young people know there's not, apart from the teacher and maybe their parents. In our projects, everything that we do has real consumers. It's real.

— Keith, CNYC

creative connections, to be innovative and to work with the community in as many ways as possible. They are in the process of ensuring that they work more closely as

a co-op, from increasing education for members about what it mean to be part of a co-op, how it works, and how decisions are made, to paying dividends to members and focussing on increased levels of participation in decision-making. In addition they also hope to further build awareness on why co-ops can be a useful mechanism when working in marginalized conditions.

Allysha talks about some of the co-op awareness that CNYC hopes to build with their members. “We are getting some interns for the month of January and would like to produce some pamphlets on What is a Co-op? Sort of an easy-to-understand brochure. It’s important for the members to have a vocabulary for co-op and anti-poverty work so that they can vocalize and communicate about what’s going on in their community.”

“CNYC’s initial reasons for existence remain relevant. Publicly sponsored and community-driven programs directed at youth are severely limited in terms of activities undertaken (e.g. the focus tends to be on sports activities), public sector resources, and a wide-spread understanding of the benefits associated with the programs directed at life skills and youth development. Additionally, economic trends of the past decade have led to decreased government spending on social programs and community-based organizations. There is growing public support for “getting back to the basics” of reading, writing, and arithmetic. While these skills provide some of the fundamental building blocks for youth education and development, they do not address all the needs required for self-sustaining, community-oriented youth. CNYC is an innovative, community-based organization that caters to the diverse

needs of youth facing several socio-economic challenges.” (Tupone, p.11)

The newsletter publications have become a powerful tool for the young members, and they have taken ownership of it. A study has been done looking at building bridges in a community. The Co-op had been expecting to see one set of outcomes and got totally different ones. Keith thinks that it showed CNYC that, “the kids felt really empowered, and that they had made a difference through their efforts. Several participants stated that they liked the newsletter because it was true to their experience.”

We had a young woman write an article for the newsletter. She wrote a raw poem about being a young Aboriginal woman and the barriers faced, not just in terms of her situation but also in terms of the city. These teens that come to CNYC, they know what’s going on, they know the situation. If we can get them to understand the structure of a co-op, we will be offering them more power to use that structure to their and their community’s advantage. They need to feel empowered.

— Allysha Larsen

According to researcher Juliano Tupone, one of the challenges that CNYC faces is that its work and benefits to the community, though slowly gaining in recognition, are not well known within the wider community of Saskatoon. In addition, long term funding, even three years, would enable a “significant degree of stability and would permit a focus on other organizational development.” Some of the strategies like working in partnership with other community groups and organizations will help address this issue in the future.

Since I've been coming here, several girls have shown themselves to be very talented, so now they are taking on a lot more of the designs and ideas within the program. I would like that to be a greater aspect of the programs but I think that that will come in time. I would like to see young people making more decisions on their own.

— Allysha Larsen

Many thanks to Keith Jorgenson and Allysha Larsen, for speaking with us.

Publications used include:

Word on the Street, A Journal for Youth and Urban Saskatoon, published by CNYC

The Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-op: A Review and Long-term Strategy by Juliano Tupone. CUISR: Community-University Institute for Social Research. University of Saskatchewan. 2003.

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ⁱ Taken from <http://www.cnyc.ca/> on January 20th, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Taken from http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/docs/pccdln/Core_Neighbourhood_Coop-E.pdf on January 20th, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Taken from <http://www.quintsaskatoon.ca/core.html> on January 20th, 2006.

^{iv} Taken from <http://www.quintsaskatoon.ca/core.html> on January 20th, 2006. This source will be identified as (Quint) in the rest of the document.

^v Tupone, Juliano. *The Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-op: A Review and Long-term Strategy*. p.2. This source will be identified as (Tupone, p.#) in the rest of the document.