



**Pan-Canadian Community Development Learning Network
Profile of Effective Practice:**

Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-operative

The Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-op's (CNYC) mission is to encourage personal growth by engaging youth in environmentally friendly and/or community building business ventures. What makes this program unique is the level of youth involvement in all 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.

This Profile of Effective Practice is one of fifteen stories examining how innovative, community-based initiatives are using comprehensive approaches to improve social and economic conditions on a local level.

The profiles were prepared as part of a 2.5-year project of the Canadian CED Network looking at the links between social inclusion and community economic development.

For other profiles, more information on the project and additional resources on social inclusion and CED, see the notes at the end of this document.

Context

In the heart of Saskatoon, on the east side of the Saskatchewan River, are five neighbourhoods that make up the city's Core area, an area marked by higher rates of poverty than is seen in any other part of Saskatoon.

In 2003 the average family income in Saskatoon was \$62,451, yet only \$32,475 in the Core Neighbourhoods. Only 16% of Saskatoon families had annual incomes of under \$20,000 while nearly 41% of Core Neighbourhood families were below this line. The City of Saskatoon's "Neighbourhood Profiles of Aboriginal Populations" in 1999 notes that 73.5% of Aboriginal families in the Core Neighbourhoods had incomes under \$20,000.

History

A retired police officer and a local school teacher, who had both grown up in the Core area, decided to do something for youth in the community. But they didn't want to simply create a recreation/drop-in centre, they had a grander and much more comprehensive vision of the impact they could have in the lives of the youth by building skills and leadership, creating income-earning opportunities, increasing environmental awareness, and developing social relationships and supports between the youth and the wider community, businesses, and other community organizations.

With some experience in co-operative development, they decided to structure the initiative as a co-op to underline the empowering and participatory environment they envisioned and to model what they hoped to teach the youth – the importance of striving for self-sustainability as opposed to dependence on charity.

They started out in the local school as 3R Recycling Co-op, a venture that was supported by a local credit union. When this space became unavailable, a city councillor arranged for them to move into an old city-owned warehouse. To this day, the City of Saskatoon has not charged them any rent for use of the place, although the City is now asking them to move as the building is about to be torn down to make way for riverside



CNYC has a youth driven culture where youth are involved in all decision making. "If they come up with the idea, we know they'll like it and they'll want to do it because it's their own idea." – Rob Walton

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

History – The Temperance Colonization Society was formed in 1881, the village of Saskatoon was incorporated in 1901, and this village amalgamated with the settlements of Nutana and Riversdale to become the city of Saskatoon in 1906.

Economy – Saskatoon began as an agricultural community and this continues to dominate the local economy; half of Canada's major export crops are grown in Saskatchewan (wheat, oats, barley, rye, flaxseed, and canola). The Saskatoon region is also active in mining as it is the world's largest exporter of uranium and contains two-thirds of the world's potash reserves.

Social Need – As in other urban centres, inner-city poverty and the correlating social (crime, drugs, lack of healthy activities for youth, etc), physical (deteriorating buildings/houses), economic (income, jobs, etc), and environmental (unclean and unsafe neighbourhoods) challenges that often are part of poverty situations.

Claim to Fame – The "City of Bridges" is named after the Cree Indian name for a local indigenous berry ('mis-sask-quah-toomina').

developments. While the large deteriorating building has had its drawbacks, it has also allowed CNYC to explore and develop a much wider range of activities than they might have been able to do in another setting.

Quint Development Corporation played a critical role early on as they managed the program for the first six months until a board of directors was created. The shift was then made from 3R to CNYC with a mission to, "Through cooperation, to encourage personal growth in the youth that attend the CNYC by engaging them in environmentally friendly and/or community building business ventures."

Activities

Reflecting the multifaceted approach that CNYC aims for as well as the youth-led reality at the co-op, there are now a whole lot of really creative things going on at any given time during the days in summer and after school the rest of the year. The girls and boys involved with CNYC range in age from 5 to 18.

Naturally, CNYC is seen as more of a hangout for the younger ones, while the older teens see it more as a place to work, learn, and earn some money. Having said that, even the little kids do some gardening and the older youth love the place for social reasons as well. Its not hard to imagine that the place can be a lot of fun for all ages with great staff, lots of other kids, a chance to earn money, and programs that have included things like breaking (or break-dancing), turn-tabling, and other urban culture activities.



CNYC has set up community gardens so that youth can grow and sell organic produce – even the little kids get involved.

CNYC also looks to create educational/experiential outings for the youth including going to see plays, visiting various parks, canoeing, and doing community service activities like running the coat check at Saskatoon Credit Union's AGM and cleaning up at community events and festivals. The kids even got to do a scavenger hunt partnered with representatives from CNYC funders recently. CNYC has computers for the youth to use and learn with and the kids have an opportunity to learn additional skills through forums set up by CNYC on topics like conflict resolution, banking, and various health issues.

In order to recognize the learning that goes on at CNYC, and to act as an incentive for the youth to stay in school, CNYC is now exploring the possibility of setting up a program that would give the kids school credits for their involvement at CNYC.

Of course youth like to earn money, and it's a bonus if they can build skills, confidence, leadership, and a sense of teamwork in the process. This is why CNYC looks for opportunities including flyer and poster contracts, bicycle repairs, painting, woodworking, crafting, and



Woodworking is one of the many skill building activities youth learn at CNYC

have set up community gardens so that the youth can grow and sell the organic produce. This summer they also hope to go berry-picking to earn some cash and are making compost and vermi-composting bins out of various salvaged and donated products.

CNYC also makes plastic rain barrels with donated barrels and then uses honey-buckets and mosquito netting to build a very creative and useful product that the youth can make some money on. CNYC had explored the idea of getting the youth to start up their own small businesses through a program call NuHorizons, but found that this was a bit

overwhelming for the youth. Instead they are presently focusing on building these skills (leadership, business planning, customer service, marketing, etc.) within existing projects for now.

Who knew that the new non-smoking by-law would also give the kids a great idea? Now that people need to smoke outside, there's a great demand for sturdy ashtrays. So, CNYC has been exploring the possibility of creating concrete ashtrays (mixing the concrete themselves) to sell to bars and businesses in the area. To make the ashtrays look really neat, CNYC is considering a partnership with Saskatoon Community Arts Project where at-risk youth would paint each one according to how the place purchasing it wanted it done.

Participatory and Comprehensive Analysis

CNYC does not have a formally articulated participatory or comprehensive framework, not that the kids would even want to use that kind of language to describe what they do even if they had one. Nevertheless, CNYC exemplifies what it truly means to be fully inclusive and holistic in everything they do; you don't have to know what CED means in order to do it well. The kids simply see it as doing what will have the greatest and fullest impact in both the short and long term in their own lives and the community as a whole.

Christine McDougall of CNYC points out that having the youth involved in all decision-making makes a big difference in how they see the program and also in the development of the youth. "In this neighbourhood in particular, everything has already been decided for these kids in places like school and other programs they are part of. The kids love it that they are asked their opinions because no one else in their lives does this. It makes them feel very good. And it's amazing the ideas that they can come up with, and the ideas just make so much sense!"

The range of ideas the youth come up with and the way ideas are implemented have so many interrelated benefits which cover many different aspects of their well-being. From conflict resolution and relationship building to enterprise development, from going to plays to building rain barrels, from organic gardening to computer skills, from banking information to break dancing, and from bike repair to vermi-composting - all of this with the intention of increasing their own skills, income, self esteem, social supports, networks, short and long term health and "self-sustainability".

Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-op

Year Incorporated – 1996

Activities – Hanging out and having fun with youth, building compost and vermin-compost bins, building and fixing bikes, organic community gardening and farmers market, making birdhouses and birdfeeders, recycling pick-up, spring and fall yard clean-up, dandelion removal, tree banding services, flyer delivery and postering, entrepreneurial development, arts and culture activities, computer access, and many other educational and experiential activities.

Impact – When the kids keep coming back daily for many years, you already know that you are making a positive impact. Income for the youth, developing personal and vocational skills, increased environmental and nutritional awareness, creative entrepreneurship, and better relationships in the community between the youth, community members, business owners, and other community organizations.

Upcoming Priorities – Secure long-term funding, find a new home, and look for more creative activities for youth to earn money and develop their skills. Right now, they are exploring the purchase of a home on three lots in partnership with Habitat for Humanity and Saskatoon Tribal Council. A large shop and plenty of garden space make for lots of exciting opportunities.

With the practice and culture of being youth driven, CNYC is developing leadership skills, program planning and implementation experience, and creating a sense of ownership among the youth of CNYC.

Comprehensive Approach

- As the “owners” of CNYC, the youth take responsibility for and direct all of the activities of the coop.
- Activities will include anything that is healthy, builds skills and self-esteem, and creates income in an environmentally friendly, cooperative, and community building kind of way.

Sometimes this includes official meetings as well as planning and presenting at the AGM, but more often it is simply done through informal conversations and a spirit of cooperation. CNYC has explored the idea of having youth sit on the Board of Directors, the only problem with this is that board members have to be adults. The adults from the community provide overall guidance and governance, but the youth make all the decisions about what they want to do. Former director Rob Walton explains the practical aspect of doing things this way, “It doesn’t work for us to decide what they should do because they simply won’t do it if they don’t want to. If they come up with the idea, we know they’ll like it and they’ll want to do it because it’s their own idea.”

While the youth often participate with money as their immediate goal, their whole well-being is what CNYC is most concerned with. McDougall explains, “What really matters is that they learn to think about the consequences of their decisions; if you don’t show up to work you won’t get paid. What matters is how they make decisions and how they choose to solve their problems.” CNYC is a place where youth learn healthy ways to interact and resolve conflicts, have a safe place where adults model healthy relationships rather than yelling at them, and participate in a peer environment that is about responsibility and positive activities rather than the many unhealthy options available in the community.

Outcomes and Evaluation

In order to put their vision into action, CNYC has developed a 5-year strategic plan. However, it is more of a directional statement than it is an action/outcome plan, for which they have a more clearly articulated 3-year plan. It is important for CNYC to remain flexible and reactive to the opportunities/visions that the youth identify. Planning in too much detail for the next 5 years would mean that the current youth would be planning what youth half a decade from now (not necessarily themselves either) would be doing, not leaving room for the youth of that time to set their own direction.

How does CNYC measure the impact they are having on the youth and in the community? When it comes to youth, the easiest way is to look at how much they like the place and whether or not they keep coming back; they will give you a good



When it comes to youth, the easiest way to know how much they like a program is whether or not they keep coming back – At CNYC they keep coming back day after day, year after year.

evaluation of your work with their attendance. The funders recognize this as well as one of the primary reporting measures is simply a list of the kids who attend (tracked by names and birthdays). They also ask five youth to fill out simple questionnaires about CNYC every year.

What is special to McDougall and the other staff is seeing kids coming back day after day and year after year. “That is the ultimate goal for us,” she says. “And seeing kids who used to come here show up when they are older and want to fix their bike or something like that is so meaningful because it shows that they know we are here, they feel some ownership of the place, and they trust us. And it’s neat to see how they can do it without any help because they’ve learned the skills here too.”

The Canadian Cooperative Association writes,

Mr. Walton marvels at the attitude change of the youth when they come into the co-op. The culture that has developed within CNYC is one of respect, safety, and co-operation. There has never been a fist-fight and the kids make up and enforce their own rules. For example, anyone who swears is required to do 20 push-ups as punishment.

And the co-op seems to be making a difference to the youths' behaviour in the community, also. Twice a year the Department of Community Resources and Employment, reviews the co-op's attendance and compares this to the records of involvement by the youth and his or her family with any social program or agency-young offenders, social assistance, etc. Although it's still too early to provide concrete statistics, Mr. Walton says that the social agencies believe the program is helping to reduce crime and increase school attachment (an indicator of future labour force attachment)

While dollars earned and composting bins sold are easy to measure, CNYC would like to be able to capture more of the broader impact for reporting purposes and funding applications. But social cost accounting is challenging particularly for small, grassroots CED organizations – how do you measure the social impact you are having in a numeric kind of way when you do not have the time or expertise for it?

Policy

Even though CNYC is providing the kind of initiative that fits with many of the Saskatchewan government's priorities (focus on children, environment, building community, keeping youth in school, and youth entrepreneurship), securing funding has been one of the greatest challenges for CNYC. They are still at the whim of “shifts in priorities” such as those in provincial departments; Industry and Resources provided some funding this year but will not likely again as they have informed CNYC that they no longer fit the department's mandate.

And even when funding becomes available, it has often not been confirmed until the last possible moment meaning that everyone is left wondering about the program and their jobs. Walton recalls one application with a federal department in 2002 that simply was not processed for many months and yet kept getting slashed to a smaller amount by the department in the meanwhile. The application finally got approved, but the money only arrived in mid January 2003 with the notification that it had to be spent by April.

Complicating the financial stability is CNYC's status as a co-op rather than a registered charity. This limits their ability to raise money from individuals and businesses, as they cannot provide donation receipts for contributions.

Unique Success Factors & Lessons Learned

- Comfort level is important; the youth are not forced to be at CNYC and can come and go as they please. No matter what, they will always be treated with respect.
- "Lots of community support is very important; people love what we do and are very helpful as a result."
- There is a sense of ownership; a participatory approach nurtures leadership development.
- "Even if people are closed minded about working with inner city youth, once they meet them they are much more interested in supporting them by donating used paint, wood, bikes, or other things that we can use."
- Found that enterprise development was a bit overwhelming for the youth, many of whom are quite transient. CNYC is still working at developing those skills (leadership, business planning, marketing, customer service, etc) through the entrepreneurial activities that they are already doing.
- "It does not work for us to decide what they should do because they simply won't do it if they don't want to. If they come up with ideas, we know they'll like it and they'll want to do it because it is their own idea!"

Brendan Reimer

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For more information on the Core Neighbourhood Youth Co-op, visit their website at <http://www.cnyc.ca>

More Profiles of Effective Practice and other resources on social inclusion are available at: <http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/pages/learningnetwork.asp>

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