

CED on the Street

Planning a community venture comes hard to an association of street people in Victoria



The View Street apartments are a drab, concrete monolith in which many of the constituents of the Victoria Street Community Association are tenants. A kind of “vertical slum,” it dramatically exemplifies the factors militating against the development of their sense of community, not to mention their capacity to run an enterprise.

BRUCE WALLACE

Over its four year history, the Victoria Street Community Association (VSCA) has been extremely successful in building community and starting projects. The homeless, or street people, are now more often referred to as the “street community.” The community is defined as having some ownership of the downtown core as their neighbourhood, and the VSCA is one of the community’s assets. The agency has established a housing project, a storefront centre, a monthly magazine, training, outreach, needle exchange, and more. And yet we still have not been able to start a community economic development venture.

Starting a business was one of the original objectives of the VSCA. A CED venture met the goals of creating jobs, getting training, providing a community service and maybe someday being a self-sufficient agency, free of government funding and government strings. It became increasingly difficult for the VSCA to be the voice of the street community when we were required to speak out against the government ministries that funded us. While the organization is perceived to be extremely successful and innovative in its grassroots, participatory process, we have

continually been unsuccessful at starting a CED venture.

As the VSCA continues to work to establish such a venture with Victoria's downtown street community, I question how well the CED process fits the community development process of this street-based agency. Over the past three years I have observed an apparently inherent contradiction, or tension, in CED practice. It appears that being successful at starting a CED venture may mean *limiting* community participation. The CED venture development process can be so comprehensive and overwhelming to the point of excluding, rather than including, community participants. This has been the struggle of the VSCA, especially in the areas of capacity building and business planning, as well as in the length of the process itself.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Two years ago, after a year of talking and planning, we started the process of venture development, and quickly discovered we lacked the capacity necessary for establishing and operating a CED project. Our organization was young and extremely grassroots. Our membership was almost exclusively from the street community and facing many barriers to employment in the market economy. Our board of directors was from the street community, therefore legal advice and financial expertise was not within the agency. Employees, also from the community, were still facing daily crises that threatened their ability to keep their employment.

It was apparent that trade-offs would have to be made if we wanted to start a CED venture. Developing the agency's capacity to establish and operate a venture would mean transforming the agency to be more organized, accountable, and less grassroots. So, on the advice of a consultant, we dropped the idea of starting a business, and took up the idea of developing our capacity to continue the CED process.

This process of capacity building, often translates into the replacement of community members with community workers and professionals. Over the next two years he VSCA successfully developed its capacity, although at a cost. The board now seeks lawyers and accountants, while still ensuring street community,

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participation. Accountability is emphasized through the development of policies and a greater distinction between staff, board, volunteers, and members. Our growth has meant a greater priority for administration and financial management, sometimes at the expense of community action.

BUSINESS PLANNING

"Where is your business plan?" It was the question that haunted us for the next year. A business plan became mystified. Not having one became our stumbling block, and not knowing

how to do one created the need for another consultant.

The process of developing a business plan illustrates the reason the street community is left out of the labour force. Creating a business plan requires literacy,



BRUCE WALLACE's first encounter with community economic development was a bit off the wall: watching Canadian politicians proudly tour sewing co-ops and farming alternatives assisted by Canadian dollars - in Jamaica. A graduate in social work from Carleton University, Bruce was involved in food banks and food buying co-ops in Ottawa before coming to Victoria in 1992 to co-ordinate the Victoria Street Community Association. He has recently resigned that post to help care for a (rapidly) growing family. (His post at VSCA, incidentally, is to be filled by Sandra Mark, late of West End Community Ventures in Ottawa.)

mathematics, time, money, and business sense. It is a process that can be incredibly alienating for people who don't have a lot of education, self-esteem and are marginalized by the marketplace - not to mention banks. The requirement of a business plan means the community requires the skills to be employed in the marketplace. Yet CED is about communities that have already been marginalized by that marketplace.

PARTICIPATION OVER TIME

Starting a CED venture, from the very conception of the idea to when it makes its first profit, seems to be a process that takes several years in most cases. That's a long time to wait for a pay cheque, espe-

cially when you are surviving through soup kitchens.

The street community wanted to start a CED venture because they wanted to create a business that would employ them. The planning process that is required to make those jobs a reality is so incredible that it excludes people who have the energy and enthusiasm for change, not to mention people struggling with mental health issues and addictions.

There are numerous crises that occur from welfare month to welfare month that exclude people from participating (volunteering) in the development of a CED venture. There are so many setbacks and unknowns in the lengthy process that it resembles just another pipe dream of a job or welfare-to-work scheme - with no real job at the end.

It is more than difficult - it is almost inconceivable, that the street community's participation and enthusiasm can be fostered over this length of time.


STREETWORKS - CAN IT WORK?

This year the VSCA could finally see its dreams, and plans, become a reality as they start their own not-for-profit business. The Streetworks Job Project plans to employ and train members of the street community in a recycling business of used building materials. It has been several years in the planning, and we are still being told that we are not ready.

But can we ever be truly ready and still involve people who face significant barriers to traditional employment and traditional planning in the process? Can the community have ownership over the project and still be considered viable to those who demand accountability and continuity?

The street community needs a CED venture because of the chronic unemployment and barriers to traditional employment, and yet this experience demonstrates that the CED process often

contains similar barriers. It can be an extremely bureaucratic process including government funders, banks, consultations, studies, and reports. It's a process that requires time and stability that is not a part of living on welfare in the inner city. At some points it can require expertise of the already employed: consultants, accountants, lawyers, and community workers are needed to work with the street community.

The VSCA continues to try to strike some balance between community participation and the CED process. As always, there remains a group of committed members working on the project, and they have a great sense of ownership over the project. Yet, with on-going cuts to welfare and social programs their involvement becomes even more threatened. These recent cuts also re-emphasize the need for street community economic ventures. 

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