Sparking Social Transformation
Through Cycles of Community-Based Research

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Abstract

For over five years Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (SEE), a community partnership in Northern Ontario, has been developing a supportive ecosystem for social enterprise, entrepreneurship and innovation. From an initial focus on youth with asset-mapping and pop-up events, to its current emphasis on regional networking and train-the-trainer programs for economic development officers, this paper sheds light on how the SEE partnership has established a broad spectrum of supports and a healthy ecosystem for alternative economies in a Northern, rural and Indigenous region. The paper argues that the strong emphasis on community engagement and the cyclical nature of the community based research methodology has enhanced the sustainability of the network and leads to systemic social innovation and transformation.

Background

Northern Ontario, a region historically dominated by resource extractive industry and divided by colonialist policies into three 'solitudes' of Indigenous peoples, and francophone and Anglophone settler communities, the region has been particularly challenged in recent decades to establish more sustainable economies and resilient communities.

Algoma University, centrally located within the region, and with a special mandate to address the needs of Indigenous learners, introduced a new, interdisciplinary program in 2002, called Community Economic and Social Development (CESD).   Community economic development (CED), Social Enterprises and environmental sustainability in Northern, rural and Indigenous communities have been an integral part of the program's curriculum since its inception, as has a strong experiential learning component. NORDIK Institute, a community based research institute, emerged from the CESD program to become a 'learning lab' for research and community development, with over 100 research and development projects completed, several of which have spanned all of Northern Ontario.

For the past six years, NORDIK has acted as the 'backbone organization' and provided leadership to a collaborative [2] of numerous organizations across the region, to develop a supportive ecosystem for social enterprise development, social entrepreneurs and social innovators. The Social Enterprise/Entrepreneurship Evolution (SEE) project has recently (March 31, 2019) completed two major funding cycles, a three year cycle funded by Ontario Trillium Foundation which focused on developing an ecosystem for social enterprise development for youth, and a second two-year funding provided by the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Growth (MEDG) which focused SE development (not limited to youth) and on training MEDG-funded Small Business Enterprise Centres', Campus Linked Accelerators' and Regional Innovation Centres' staff to better support the development of social enterprises.

NORDIK staff used community based research to support the region to develop an ecosystem for social enterprise development and growth. Community based research, with its cyclical approach to resolving practical community issues, seemed an ideal methodology to build stronger relationships between and among culturally and geographically isolated communities, as well as to foster development of alternative economies. Using NORDIK's previous relationships with communities within the region, funders, and cross-sectoral experience, as well as a strengths-based approach to development, a healthy ecosystem which supports ongoing social innovation has emerged.

This paper explores the learnings from this research related to two research questions:

- How might a community-university research collaboration contribute to developing an ecosystem to support social enterprise/social entrepreneurship development and social innovation?

- How might the cyclical process of a community-based research methodology contribute to continuous social innovation?

Literature Review

Entrepreneurial ecosystems have recently emerged as a new economic development strategy (Spigel and Harrison, 2017: 152) and successful ecosystems demonstrate a number of shared characteristics. These dense social networks are characterized by knowledge mobilization and integration, including knowledge about the entrepreneurial processes, often facilitated by university research centres; are best led by entrepreneurs rather than top-down leadership; and benefits of the ecosystem usually accrue to entrepreneurs in unrelated sectors (156-157).   A review of the literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems (Spigel and Harrison, 2017 reveals resilient ecosystems show high levels of connectivity between ecosystem actors; create new resources that flow through networks; and attract significant new resources to the ecosystem (163). Spigel and Harrison conclude that although ecosystems can provide substantial benefit to entrepreneurs and start-ups, such benefits may not be distributed equally, and caution that equitable distribution of such benefits must be addressed (165).

Community Economic Development (CED), and social entrepreneurial activity, by their nature address the inequities realized by economic activity motivated primarily by a profit motive (Silver and Loxley, 2008). CED – and by extension, social enterprises – is generated by local people, based on local needs and resources (6-7). The use of CED methods can empower people to address their own social and economic requirements, and unleash "enormous creativity" (12) that may lead to gap-filling or even social transformation.

Moore and Wesley (2011) suggest that the difference between gap-filling, or adaptation, and social transformation (or social innovation) is simply incremental levels of social change (5). They argue that community capacity to create a system of continuous innovation leads to social and ecological resilience (5). Social networks, led by 'institutional entrepreneurs' with a set of defined characteristics are deemed key to the development of such continuous innovation. Such characteristics include the capacity to recognize patterns that act as barriers to innovation, the ability to build and broker relationships through strategic visioning, the ability to re-frame knowledge and discourse to engage others, and the ability to inspire, motivate and empower network members (6-8).

Research in social enterprises illustrates that dialogue is a key component in the creation of transformative social change through its capacity to build trusting relationships between a broad range of actors (Trivedi and Misra, 2018). The knowledge is deepened and enhanced through iterative cycles of dialogue that empowers participants and builds their collaborative community capacity (126). This collective wisdom fuels and further refines the iterative cycles of conception, planning and action.

In sum, the literature review suggests that entrepreneurial ecosystems, i.e., dense social networks that mobilize and transfer knowledge, may serve as a successful economic development strategy although inequities may arise from such a system. Social enterprise and other forms of CED can and do address such gaps by focusing on building local economies designed with and by community members. Incremental changes can lead to continuous social innovation and thus social transformation, through skilled knowledge brokers who engage a diversity of actors and empower network members. Network members, through ever-deepening dialogue, are empowered to participate in Iterative cycles of conceptualizing, planning and action, thus creating ongoing social innovation and resilience.

Research Methodology

Community-based research is a collaboration between community groups and researchers for the purpose of creating new knowledge or understanding about a practical community issue in order to bring about change. The issue is generated by the community and community members participate in all aspects of the research process. Community-based research therefore is collaborative, participatory, empowering, systematic and transformative. (Hills and Mullett, 2000)

Community-based research (CBR) was an obvious methodological choice for the project given the above definition, its iterative nature, and the partners' desire to address the lack of an ecosystem for social entrepreneurs and social enterprise development in Northern Ontario. Four factors made NORDIK Institute, affiliated with Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie, the preferred choice as a university partner: a) its experience with CBR as its preferred research methodology; b) its extensive research in the social economy field; and c) its interconnectedness with the undergraduate Community Economic and Social Development (CESD) program, which already integrated social entrepreneurship and social enterprise development into its curricula; and d) its research and development networks established across Northern Ontario including robust relationships with Indigenous and francophone communities, as well as other communities and organizations.

The project was founded on relationships already developed in the region by the collaborators, and included funders, community-based organizations, social entrepreneurs and researchers. The research comprised two major cycles: the first iteration focused on the development of an ecosystem to support youth social entrepreneurs (YSEs), and a second cycle emphasizing broader social enterprise development and capacity-building amongst business and economic development officers, aimed at promoting sustainability of the ecosystem (ONE-SEP). Together, these cycles aimed at 1) addressing the regional gap in social enterprise/entrepreneurship development; and 2) ensuring sustainability and resilience of an ecosystem which could address some of the social, economic and environmental issues challenging the region.

Cycle 1: Social Enterprise Evolution (SEE)

The research partners worked closely together over an intense six-week period spanning December 2012 – January 2013 to develop a governance structure and funding proposal loosely based on a constellation model of collaboration (e.g., Surman, 2006). The partners also adopted a Collective Impact model for evaluation (Kania and Kramer, 2011)[3] , identifying NORDIK Institute as the 'backbone organization'. Funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation in May 2013, these structures were intended to provide guidance to the emerging community-university research collaborative as it aimed to develop an ecosystem to support Youth Social Entrepreneurs (YSEs).

Figure 1. Structure of Community-University Research Collaborative and Key Foci

ACCESS TO CAPITAL

COMMUNICATIONS & RESOURCES

COMMUNITY - UNIVERSITY COLLABORATIVE

HUMAN CAPITAL

SOCIAL CAPITAL

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3   It should be noted that at the time this research was initiated the topics of constellation governance and collective impact approaches were still in development and there was a much less extensive literature than is available today.

The first major research cycle spanned a period of September 2013 – September 2016 when funding for the YSE component concluded, although ongoing efforts by NORDIK extended the work to March 31, 2017. The most significant research activities during this cycle are outlined in the chart below.

Figure 2. Cycle 1: Focus on Youth Social Entrepreneurship (YSE)

Ecosystem Development Area	Activities
Community University Collaborative	• Identified Theory of Change • Developed constellations • Monthly e-meetings & 3 annual symposia provided opportunities for dialogue and reflection, leading to planning and action • Community collaborators hosted/assisted asset-mapping & training activities, identified YSEs for 'spotlight series', identified gaps and opportunities to advance project
Human Capital Development	• educational & training activities at high schools, community organizations and events • Indigenous-specific project (Urban Indigenous Youth for Change) initiated and funded • university-level course developed & delivered • social entrepreneurship integrated into youth entrepreneurship training summer camps (CFDCs) • advice & support provided to numerous social enterprises and social entrepreneurs on individual basis (telephone, electronic, face-to-face)
Social Capital Development	• Asset-mapping activities in 8 communities • 3 regional events (Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Timmins) built relationships with policy makers, funders, and between YSEs and collaborators • Regional events and asset mapping connected YSEs with supporting organizations and funders, and developed definitions and identified resources • Participation in Ontario-wide network (Soscent 7) built relationships with other organizations sharing a common vision
Communications and Resources	• Website development (bilingual and culturally appropriate) provided communications infrastructure including access to resources • 'Spotlight' series in monthly newsletter furthered understanding of social entrepreneurship, social enterprises and social innovation, and provided role models and mentoring • SE101 developed and posted to website, delivered to numerous community groups across the region
Access to Capital	• Partnership supported one of Collaborators to obtain a micro-financing program, Social Enterprise Northern Ontario (SENO), to support SEs (up to $15,000) across region • Allocation of SEE funds to 9 community-based SE start ups • Links to numerous funding sources identified and added to website and advice provided by NORDIK interns as well as workshops for YSEs on funding applications

Cycle 2: Increasing Sustainability through ONE-SEP

Funding from a new source, Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Growth (MEDG), was obtained for another two years commencing in April 2017. This second cycle of research, based on the identified need for greater ecosystem stability and sustainability, aimed at further developing the skills of business and economic development officers to support social enterprise development across the region, and engaged a second set of partners drawn from regional innovation centres (RICs), small business enterprise centres (SBECs), and campus entrepreneurship accelerators. These new partners, comprising the Ontario Network of Entrepreneurs (ONE) expanded the mandate of SEE, refocusing the Collaborative's efforts towards ensuring that supports were available to social entrepreneurs and innovators through existing government- and/or community-based services. The most significant activities of this research cycle are outlined in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Cycle 2: ONE-SEP

Category	Activities
Community University Collaborative	• monthly e-meetings designed for planning and coordination of activities, integrate a learning circle component to build capacity with partners • together, partners established a regionally-specific definition of social enterprise • over 40 partners including MEDG-funded services, as well as MNDM regional officers
Human Capital Development	• over 115 educational & training capacity-building activities at introductory and advanced levels • Innovation Centres introduced categories of annual awards for 'Social entrepreneurs' and 'Social Enterprises' of the year • over 470 business and economic development staff were trained to provide support to social enterprise development, and social entrepreneurs
Social Capital Development	• asset-mapping activities across the region, and included a train-the-trainer event for asset-mapping • 3 regional events (Sault Ste. Marie, Kenora, Timmins) built relationships with policy makers, funders, and between SEs and collaborators • peer mentoring/coaching in an emerging field through the various activities -continuum of what peer mentoring means in Northern Ontario
Communications and Resources	• website enhancement and expansion to reflect expanded mandate of Collaborative • 32 new training resources –webinars, presentations, workbooks, toolkits–tailored to needs of business service providers including topics such as, business development, access to capital, scaling up and social impact measurement
Access to Capital	• SETUP (Social Enterprise Training that Unites Peers) providing access to capital through CFDC; • Social Enterprise Procurement and Investment Readiness Fund (PIRF); SENO • SENO

Discussion:

The research methodology provided numerous opportunities for reflection, including at the conclusion of the two major cycles, but also at monthly meetings of the collaborators, at the several regional events, and at the conclusion of each of the asset mapping activities. Each of the areas identified in Figure 1 above, benefited from an integration of solutions to gaps or needs into the next cycle(s) of activities that were identified by reflection(s) on the previous cycle(s). This cyclical integration of new learnings into workplans and research activities became a crucial component to the relative success of the overall project, due to the emergent nature of addressing the region's need for a supportive ecosystem for social enterprise/ entrepreneurial development.

Further, the need for action to ensure sustainability of the ecosystem emerged from the initial funding cycle, as the Collaborative reflected on project outcomes. None of the partners had the capacity to fully support a social enterprise/entrepreneurship ecosystem across the diverse and geographically disparate region, although there was strong belief in the value of such an agenda. The second cycle of activities, therefore, focused on developing capacity within existing entrepreneurial support organizations to better service social enterprises and social entrepreneurs, and promote such development through their various networks. Importantly, CBR and the five-year longitudinal study allowed us to engage with the business service providers a number of times (through asset-mapping, workshop delivery, resource development) until they were ready to engage more fully with us in the second cycle.

The following section outlines some of the most significant ways that cyclical reflections by collaborators, community groups, and social entrepreneurs influenced the project's outcomes.

A. Governance & Structure of Community-University Collaborative

The cyclical nature of CBR resulted in several shifts in the governance and structure of the collaborative. The initial project workplan assumed that during the first year, several 'constellations' would be established by the governing partners, and that facilitation provided by the funder-supported resource organization, Innoweave, would assist the organization in establishing the five components of a Collective Impact model. At the commencement of this project in 2013, however, a significant challenge to the project's entire workplan became almost immediately apparent: terms such as social enterprise, social entrepreneurship and social innovation were relatively unknown in Northern Ontario [4], and differing types of social enterprises (e.g., non-profits, coops, First Nation-operated, etc.) did not recognize themselves as related organizations. Further, feedback from project collaborators' initial meetings, as well as participants in early asset-mapping activities, identified this lack of awareness as a vital factor requiring swift remediation, and thus staff were obliged to re-focus efforts on addressing these priority needs.

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4   In fact, Katie Elliott, lead for the YSE cycle of the research, indicated at her employment interview that she had conducted a google search on these terms, combined with Northern Ontario, and found absolutely no 'hits'. An indicator of the project's success, was that by the conclusion of the first cycle, a similar search yielded over 100 'hits' with all of them related in some way to this research project.

As project collaborators expended valuable time and resources on refining their own knowledge and providing feedback to staff in developing and/or adapting essential resources and materials relevant to the region, and in hosting or co-hosting activities, concepts such as constellation governance, theory of change, and collective impact became seemingly superfluous layers of confusion. Thus, at the project's conclusion of its first year and the Collaborative's reflections at a regional symposium in Thunder Bay, the emphasis in the project's workplan on structure and governance shifted from defining and applying these approaches, to appreciating the emergence of various initiatives. Collaborators were encouraged to take leadership of various activities resulting, for example, in an asset-mapping with Indigenous youth in a one-day canoeing exercise, and the integration of social enterprise/entrepreneurship training during youth camps that had previously excluded the 'social' component of youth entrepreneurship.

Collaborators feedback on development needs, training and resources was collected regularly through the monthly meetings, as was planning and coordination of activities. Reflections by the first cycle of project collaborators identified the priority for a learning community for collaborators with such training becoming a regular agenda item at e-meetings in the second cycle. These training sessions included areas such as scale-ups, social return on investment, and funding opportunities, as the skills and knowledge of the collaborators grew and advanced. The collaborators also provided feedback on topics for webinar development that were delivered during the second major cycle.

As well, based on the conclusions of the first cycle, the Steering Committee was expanded beyond MEDG identified project partners to include a representative from a francophone community, an Indigenous business development organization and a small business enterprise centre in Northwestern Ontario.

The involvement of the university's undergraduate program, Community Economic and Social Development (CESD) as a partner in the collaborative also provided unique benefits. Continual integration of academic knowledge and literature into the project, presenting and obtaining feedback at conferences which provided additional opportunity to reflect and gain learnings, were then woven back into the discussions with collaborators and assisted in the development of resources. A specific course on SE development was created, and learnings were generalized and informed other CESD program courses and curricula.

Finally, the cyclical nature of CBR, pointed out a major gap in the governance and structure of the SEE project as the collaborators approached the end of the first funding cycle, i.e., that the initial emphasis on developing youth social entrepreneurs had not provided a sustainable infrastructure of its ongoing development. The partners recognized that the sustainability gap could best be filled by enhancing the services already provided to other types of entrepreneurs, and providing such service providers with the training and resources to ensure their skills, and confidence in providing such services, met the need. Thus, the second major cycle of research emphasized capacity building with business and economic development professionals, to ensure the sustainability of the ecosystem and the networks built during the first cycle.

B. Human Capital Development

The initial focus on youth social entrepreneurship was maintained throughout the first three years of the project, but early reflections encouraged by CBR methodology provided a number of expansions and enhancements to human capital development during this period. At the end of Year 1 of the project, reflections had identified that although the project was attracting a great deal of interest and participation from youth across the region, greater cultural awareness and sensitivity was required to reach Indigenous youth and communities.

As a result, the staffing was enlarged by the hiring of an Indigenous-focused youth, who was able to identify, before the end of Year 2, additional funding sources to better engage with this cultural group, and Urban Indigenous Youth for Change (UIYFC) was born. This project-within-a-project sparked many new activities including asset-mapping with youth in several First Nations, development of numerous culturally-appropriate activities and materials, and strongly linking arts, social enterprises and Indigenous youth. The UIYFC project still continues, tackling tough issues such as environmental degradation (e.g., four Indigenous youth made public presentations at a bi-annual meeting of the International Joint Commission on Great Lakes Water Quality) and racism (UIYFC established a province-wide network of Indigenous youth leaders against racism).

Another area where research reflective cycles encouraged action was through leadership building with project collaborators. One of the 'early adopter' Collaborators, a representative from a rural Community Futures program, seized the opportunity the project provided to integrate social enterprises and social entrepreneurship into its mandate for youth entrepreneurship and enterprise development. Through reflections at the conclusion of Year 1, she sought support from SEE to assist her resulting in the inclusion of social enterprise/entrepreneurship into her organizations' annual training events for youth. Again, staff revised the project workplan to incorporate these activities, reaching literally hundreds more youth (approximately 150 on an annual basis) through this initiative emerging from cyclical processes.

The Collaborators also identified the need for YSEs to have access to individualized support, particularly during start-up, especially with developing a business plan that incorporated the social goals and with funding applications. The project budget therefore required revision to reflect allocations for annual youth internships, the interns being trained to provide such support to YSEs. The interns provided a series of both face-to-face and on-line events to support YSEs in development of start-ups, as well as problem solving, employing collaborators and social enterprise practitioners as 'experts', thus also providing role models and sometimes mentors to the YSEs.

C. Social Capital Development

The cyclical nature of CBR also contributed to the social capital development of the project. Community engagement from previous NORDIK research had resulted in partnerships and relationships across the vast geographic region of Northern Ontario, and across its multiple diversities. These networks provided a solid foundation for the creation of an innovative, responsive ecosystem for social enterprise/entrepreneurship development and led, in part, to the collaborative development in the first phase of the SEE project. Additionally, as the project expanded during that first phase, a number of 'weak links' with funding organizations and communities were strengthened, particularly through the emphasis on strengths-based development. NORDIK's relationship with the Ontario Trillium Foundation, for example, was significantly strengthened throughout the first SEE cycle, leading to positive responses to other funding opportunities for Northern Ontario research and social enterprise development.

Second, the success of the first cycle attracted new federal partners to the second cycle, as well as greater interest from business and economic development officers and service providers. MEDG's call for proposals for the second cycle required that a non-profit with experience in social enterprise development lead the initiative, and NORDIK was able to easily identify the other required partners for the application, based on its 'backbone' organizational role with the first cycle and resulting relationships.

Asset mapping activities built social capital within communities across the region, as local groups came together at the behest of collaborators, and learned about one another's aims, priorities, skills and resources related to social enterprise development. The strengths-based approach supported confidence-building, as well as identifying the communities' assets, and created a welcoming environment for individuals and smaller, sometimes fledgling organizations. These events also created opportunities for people interested in SE to find an initiative to support.   The community reports generated by SEE staff documented the numerous assets identified and assisted communities in analyzing readiness and priorities for social enterprise development. Several communities were able to initiate startups as a result of these sessions, while others generated planning input for decision-makers.

Like snowball sampling in qualitative research, CBR activities sparked and strengthened new and existing relationships throughout the cycles, allowing researchers to re-engage community members through the many and varied activities. This deepened levels of trust amongst and between geographic communities, communities of interest and culturally distinct communities, organizations and funders.

D. Communications and Resources

Given the vast geographic region of Northern Ontario, and the dearth of region-specific materials and resources for SE development, significant resources were allocated to the creation, development and ongoing maintenance of an engaging web presence. The CBR methodology enabled SEE to provide the needed content for the website, with crucial feedback throughout the project by collaborators, partners, funders and participants in project activities, thereby ensuring that relevant content was created, adapted and revised. Early feedback from Collaborators and participants, for example on their alienation from the social enterprise terminology and greater comfort with the term 'change-makers', leading to the adoption of "seethechange" in the website url (i.e., www.seethechange.ca).

One of the most vital components of the project's/ecosystem development was the website and monthly e-newsletter's 'Spotlight Series' which highlighted social enterprises at all stages of development, from diverse cultural groups, with a wide variety of social missions and priorities. The spotlights engaged collaborators and other community members in identifying social enterprises in their communities, highlighting regional and cultural differences, and providing role models for YSEs, and in the second cycle for business and economic developers. The SEs ranged from well-established organizations now diversifying or scaling-up to start-ups, from cooperatives to sole proprietorships, from employers with multiple staff, to volunteer organizations, and much more.

The second cycle of research provided an opportunity to strengthen and expand the training and development resources, with an emphasis on train-the-trainer materials for business and economic development officers. Feedback from participants in training sessions addressed specific needs, such as a resource manual for funding of SEs, a Facilitator's Guide for SE Asset-Mapping, and resources for scale-ups and Social Return on Investment.

E. Access to Financial Capital

Access to capital was identified as a crucial component for extending social enterprise development across the region, and early in the project, one of the partners, PARO, was able to lead the development of a new funding program, called SENO (Social Enterprise Northern Ontario, a combined grant/loan program). At the conclusion of the first round of funding, a review of applicants revealed that the eastern region of Northern Ontario was not well represented. The cyclical nature of CBR allowed integration of this knowledge into the following year's workplan, with the result that promotion and support in accessing the program was provided within the first funding cycle of SEE and throughout the second cycle.

The feedback from both Collaborators and participants encouraged re-allocation of some of the funds in Year 3 of the first cycle to direct Social Enterprise support. This small investment (approximately $10,000) provided support to nine community-based SE start ups, again extending the reach of the project into some new communities, and in some cases, building on asset-mapping activities to strengthen and deepen the project's roots.

As outlined above, the cyclical nature of CBR led the project to deepening ties with business and economic development officers, thus strengthening opportunities for SEs to access more traditional grants and loans through relationships with their organizations. One Community Futures partner collaborated with NORDIK and a small business enterprise centre to deliver SE business plan training to a cohort of 9 SEs with the CFDC providing access to funding once their business plans were completed. One of the SE participants were able to secure close to $500,000 to launch their chocolate factory SE.

As more traditional business development agencies developed relationships with SEs, saw their benefits to the regional economy, and grew confidence in their skills to both identify and support them, their willingness and capacity to work more closely with this non-traditional sector of the economy grew. This became more and more apparent as business and economic development officers have taken on larger roles in supporting SE development, including for example, hosting interns and regional meetings focused on SE development, hosting annual awards and recognition for social entrepreneurs and SEs, and collaborating on peer funding circle development.

Conclusions

Community university partnerships are often challenging – their emergent nature requires substantial flexibility on the part of researchers, funders and community partners, and thus are not always attractive undertakings. Yet these collaborations reap the benefit of addressing that practical community issue in need for social innovation, and continuously revising and refining the innovation as new aspects to the issue – and its solution – emerge. This research illustrated that social entrepreneurial ecosystem development provides a locus for continuous social innovation through CBR processes of conceptualizing, planning and acting. Dense social and knowledge networks emerged that mobilized social enterprise development, sparked community capacity building, and attracted new resources to the sector as its success grew. Network participants demonstrated empowerment as they took leadership in identifying gaps and new resources, started and scaled up enterprises, shared their knowledge and experiences, and obtained recognition for their successes.

Northern, rural and Indigenous regions such as Northern Ontario, historically dependent on extractive industry, are in desperate need of social innovation to address the social, environmental and economic challenges facing them. The cyclical nature of CBR encourages – indeed, even requires – the incorporation of a reflective process that stimulates ongoing integration of emergent actions to address evolving analysis and understanding of community challenge(s) and their resolution.   The numerous, iterative opportunities for dialogue provided by this project created opportunities for collaborators to develop trusting relationships, a key component to empowering research participants in their processes of conceptualization, planning and action.

This research also illustrates CBR's value as results from earlier stages of the research were integrated into its ongoing and new activities, building on the structural knowledge and understanding of both the issues facing economic restructuring as well as on its potential solutions.   Building a social entrepreneurship ecosystem across the region required the participation and collaboration of a broad range of the region's citizens, organizations, communities and leaders. Their engagement has rooted social enterprise as an alternative model of economic relations and provided Northern Ontario with an opportunity to transform its economy to one that promotes greater equity and inclusivity, and respect for the environment. The ecosystem, if its success continues, may lead to greater resilience for the region and may point other, similar regions, to new processes of economic development that will ultimately result in social transformation.

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