

Nova Scotia Sustainable Communities Initiative

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Abstract

A working partnership of more than 40 federal, provincial municipal and First Nations organisations, the Nova Scotia Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) is an innovative and award-winning organisation working towards improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Nova Scotia's communities.

Since its inception in 1999, SCI has taken an incremental approach to this partnership, establishing and testing a new process for governments and communities to work collaboratively.

The intent of the initiative is to facilitate and support partnerships among federal and provincial governments, local municipalities, First Nations, and other local organisations in coordinated efforts to address community issues from a comprehensive and collaborative approach.

Keywords

Community sustainability, government collaboration, government community partnerships

Impetus for change

In late 1999, federal and provincial government departments in the province of Nova Scotia, Canada, made a commitment to closer collaboration and coordination of the programs and services that they deliver to citizens and communities. This commitment was formalised through the establishment of the Nova Scotia Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) based on the concepts of sustainable development called for by the Brundtland Committee in 1987 and re-confirmed at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Purpose and objectives of the change

The initiative's purpose is support communities through a coordinated approach that integrates social, cultural, economic and environmental policies and programs. SCI is not a separate government department or program but rather a partnership aimed at addressing complex issues through collaboration and shared ownership.

The SCI vision is communities and governments working together toward long term sustainability.

The goals are to:

- design and implement horizontal coordination within government

- support sustainable communities through a collaborative approach that integrates social, cultural, economic and environmental policies and programs
- build community partnerships using new models.

The Sustainable Communities Initiative is:

“... government much more engaged...a deeper kind of partnership... a model for the rest of Canada”

Janet Larkman, Western Valley Development Authority.

“process theory in action... an initiative to enable culture change; a journey.”

Dan Graham, former Deputy Minister, Nova Scotia Agriculture & Fisheries.

“uniquely Nova Scotian; a shift from ‘talking’ to Canadians to ‘listening’ to Canadians.”

Garth Bangay, Regional Director General, Environment Canada.

How it was done

In December 1999, federal and provincial departments were invited to join a coordinating committee to oversee the initiative. The early work of the coordinating committee involved building a common understanding among participants about the initiative and establishing the structures through which the work would be undertaken.

In June 2000, two rural areas in Nova Scotia, the watersheds of the Bras d’Or Lakes and the Fundy/Annapolis Basin, were identified to pilot the initiative. Field teams were established in each area. These teams now include federal, provincial, municipal and First Nations representatives who live and/or work in the partner areas.

In September 2000, the SCI Office was established to provide support to the coordinating committee and field teams. The three-person secretariat provides administrative and communications support for the activities of all components of the Initiative.

How it works

The Initiative has four structural elements. Two field teams work with community groups to support local priorities and link existing initiatives and networks, inside and outside government, in each partner area. These teams are comprised of representatives of federal, provincial and municipal governments and First Nations. The teams collaborate on and facilitate specific local initiatives and create a new space for governments to work with communities — a ‘kitchen table’ approach that reflects an informal, human face of government.

A coordinating committee includes federal and provincial government representatives who address shared issues and work in partnership to streamline services, develop a broad understanding of issues, policies and procedures and establish the mechanisms and tools for working collaboratively across departments and agencies and the different orders of government.

There are two champions: a federal government Regional Director General and a provincial government Deputy Minister who build support and engagement at the highest bureaucratic and political levels and report on progress to the initiative's founding body — Nova Scotia Federal Council's Economic Development Committee (FEDC–DM). FEDC–DM is comprised of the most senior federal and provincial government officials in the province — this committee approves each year's business plan and budget and provides strategic direction and senior support.

Finally, there is a small secretariat/office that includes a coordinator, communications advisor and an administrative assistant. The office staff provide administrative and communications support to the field teams, coordinating committee and champions and serve as a liaison between the teams/ committees and with related initiatives and efforts.

Examples of results achieved to date

The Caledon Institute of Social Policy has just completed an external review of the SCI. The evaluation concludes that the SCI has laid the groundwork for new and ambitious ways of government doing business with communities. The review summarises the SCI as having a well-established and supportive context for the goals it is pursuing and argues that working across boundaries is a demanding and exciting journey.¹ The review identifies many signs of progress. Some of the specific achievements communities and government partners point to are:

1) In September 2004, the Institute of Public Administration, Canada (IPAC) awarded the SCI with the silver medal in its annual competition recognising excellence and innovation in the public sector. The award acknowledges world-leading advancement in government theory and practice, overcoming the limitations of traditional vertical structures to see opportunities and create solutions beyond the abilities of one agency or jurisdiction.²

2) The successful development and submission of a community-driven application to designate the Bras d'Or Lakes as a non-discharge zone for boat sewage under the *Canada Shipping Act*. The application was the result of collaborative effort; federal and provincial departments funded the coordination, municipalities conducted the public consultation and the Pitupaq Partnership (First Nations & Municipal leaders) sponsored the application. This project also includes the first interdepartmental joint action for regulatory enforcement for the Bras d'Or Lakes. During the summer months eight different organizations sent their enforcement officers on the same boat to make joint inspections on the Lakes.

3) Each field team commissioned a review and analysis of sustainability issues in their area of jurisdiction and validated the results through a series of meetings with First Nations and other community groups. Since the teams were established in 2000, they have facilitated and participated in more than twenty community dialogue events.

¹ *Sustainable Communities Initiative: External Review*, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, May 2004.

² Institute of Public Administration, Canada, *Press Release*, September 2004.

4) In 2003, all eight municipalities in the Annapolis-Fundy partner area adopted a series of sustainability principles and characteristics developed by the field team to guide future municipal decision-making. In 2004, the Bras d'Or Lakes field team expanded to include all of Cape Breton Island.

5) The coordinating committee has developed an *Issue Analysis Tool* to examine issues holistically and horizontally, a *Logic Model* to articulate a working definition/snapshot of the Initiative, a *Governance Document* that articulates roles and responsibilities, and a *Business Plan* format that reflects common language for the more than 25 federal and provincial partners.

Outlook for the future

The field teams and coordinating committee have built the capacity to undertake numerous initiatives to support the economic, social, and environmental sustainability in two regions of Nova Scotia and to work horizontally in a traditionally vertical environment.

SCI's partners are beginning to realise the tangible benefits of building stronger working relationships, addressing common priorities and developing common solutions. The outlook for the future is very positive as the initiative continues to grow and build on success.

New opportunities and capacity for useful relationships has been the most widespread result of SCI. Given that the central mechanism of SCI has been and is explicitly formulated as bringing about collaboration, this result has to be rated as a major success. Without the opportunities and arrangements made available through SCI, there would be little weaving together of people and perspectives needed if government is to act in a more concerted way to assist communities.³

Key stakeholders and beneficiaries

The stakeholders and beneficiaries of SCI are both within governments and within communities. The communication and exchanges around community needs and program resources assist federal and provincial departments to develop a network of departments and agencies in response to identified community issues of sustainability. This is accomplished by sharing information across departments, forming multiple agency task teams to assess and respond to community needs and by helping communities navigate among government programs and services. Stakeholder areas of interest are reflected partially in the task team areas that have evolved within SCI. These have included task teams on rural transportation, the designation of the Bras d'Or Lakes as a no discharge zone for boating sewage, wharves, water quality and aboriginal issues.

Potential implications for other organisations

The issues surrounding long-term sustainability are complex, as are the delicate, multi-level horizontal partnerships that are beginning to take hold with the federal, provincial, municipal and First Nations

³ *Sustainable Communities Initiative: External Review* Caledon Institute of Social Policy, May 2004.

organisations involved in the Sustainable Communities Initiative. SCI provides governments with a venue to work with each other and with communities in an innovative and exciting way.

Departments and agencies under resource constraints are increasingly using partnerships such as the SCI to deliver their mandate and achieve results. SCI is an innovative model for horizontal government collaboration that provides an opportunity for partners to address complex issues; to build stronger working relationships; to address common priorities and develop common solutions; and to develop holistic views of governments and community priorities. SCI provides a framework for achieving specific goals and priorities.

The field teams have forged a new path for government-community working relationships and have facilitated projects and initiatives that are of fundamental importance to the regions they serve.