The (F)Utility of the Concept of "Community Sustainability" in an Inter-Dependent World

Tom Beckley
Department of Rural Economy, University of Alberta
and Canadian Forest Service

The perplexing title of this paper stems from my own mix of optimism and pessimism regarding the future of forest-dependent communities in Canada. Technological change, globalization of the economy and culture, changing attitudes among or own urban population and citizens of countries who buy our exports all may be viewed as trends that spell trouble for places that rely on the timber sector. These trends make me question the sustainability of forest-dependent communities *as they currently exist*. But therein lies the key to my guarded optimism for these places. They need not continue to exist *as they currently are* to continue to exist at all. They may be sustainable by being adaptable, by inventing new futures for themselves, and discovering new functions and economic activities that can support their populations. So, while in one sense it may be futile to think about community sustainability in light of current global trends, in another sense it remains a useful concept, particularly if we focus on two dimensions of sustainability. First, we must examine the meaning of local, or community sustainability in the context of the larger economy and society. Secondly, we must examine the relationship between the sustainability of human systems and their neighbouring natural ecosystems.

I will begin by discussing the concepts of community and sustainability. "Communities of place" must be distinguished from "communities of interest" before we can use the term community constructively. Sustainability is defined in contrast to the term persistence. The two could be misconstrued to have the same meaning, but there are important, subtle differences. Following the definitions, the discussion of the futility and utility of community sustainability will be structured as a debate, with futility "points" and utility "counterpoints." I will conclude on thoughts on how social science can contribute to our understanding of community sustainability.

Defining community sustainability.

Sociologists have been struggling with definitions of community for several generations. The intractable nature of the problem has made lifelong careers for some scholars. The debate centres around the issue of whether "community" refers to a 1) a shared set of interests and institutional affiliations, 2) a common geographical context, or 3) a combination of both.

Communities of place are geographically bounded spaces made up of groups of individuals and the social and physical infrastructure that supports them. The towns, hamlets and villages that dot the landscape of rural Canada are communities of place. These places often have strong connections to the natural resources that surround them. Many also have a history of rapid expansion and contraction, or "booms and busts" in more popular terminology. Some resource-dependent communities of place have ceased to exist altogether. Such cases provide clear examples of unsustainable communities.

Communities of interest refer to social aggregations based on shared values, belief systems, goals, or common stakes in various program or policy outcomes. These may exist within or cut across the geographical boundaries that define communities of place. One example of a community of interest is an academic discipline as represented by a professional society such as the Rural Sociological Society. Members of this society share certain professional norms, as well as the desire to advance knowledge in the field, and disseminate those research findings to communities and policy-makers for whom they are relevant. The only geographical manifestation of this community of interest is the annual meeting, held at a different site every year. The combination of telecommunications developments and reduced university budgets, make it easy to imagine a not-too-distant future where members of such a community of interest might maintain their "community ties" exclusively through media that have no geographic grounding (internet, teleconferencing, published literature, etc.).

Some rural sociologists have argued that the uniqueness of rural communities lies in the overlap between these concepts of place and interest in rural locations. Historically, this may have been true. Ethnic and religious homogeneity, occupational identity, isolation, and a distinct and unique rural culture may have led to continuity between "communities of place" and "communities of interest." That is to say, rural people who shared a common heritage, shared values, and similar political and economic interests were historically likely to be neighbours within geographically bounded spaces.

I am not willing to make the assumption that communities of place and interest are largely co-terminous in the modern context. So the remainder of this paper will deal exclusively with communities of place, specifically communities of place that rely heavily upon exploitation of the natural resources that surround them.

Before proceeding, it is equally important to define the term sustainability. The famous Bruntland Commission Report asserts that sustainable development is "...a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987:9) Elsewhere, the Commission

asserts that sustainability is about fulfilling human needs and aspirations over time. Sustainable communities, then, are the combination of institutions, social and physical infrastructure in a given place, that enable humans to meet their own needs and aspirations, while not compromising those of future generations.

I wish to emphasize that, in the context of communities, sustainability implies more than perseverance or persistence. The word sustain includes the following definitions, "to support, to bear the weight of, keep up, keep going." Synonyms for sustain include, "support, nourish, and encourage." In contrast, "persist" means, "to continue steadily in any course commenced; persevere; to continue steadfastly in a certain course in spite of discouragement, obstacles, or difficulties." Synonyms for the word persist include, "endure, linger, outlive" (Williams 1977). Community stability has long been a policy objective of forestry agencies in North America, but the focus has wrongly been on the persistence of these places, rather than on their long-term ability to be sustained by the natural resources that surround them. Persistence is about capturing government subsidies, lobbying for resource allocations that will maintain a certain level of base employment, and other strategies that allow forest-dependent communities to endure and linger in the short-term. Sustainability is about determining the level of human activity that a given forest ecosystem can support and nourish in the long-term. I now outline various arguments for and against the prospects for the sustainability forest-dependent communities in our inter-dependent world.

Futility or Utility? Issue #1 - Globaliztion of the economy

POINT: Historically, frontier communities had to provide for many of their own needs out of necessity due to poor transportation links and infrequent contact with major production centres. While these places developed for the purpose of resource extraction, the flow of goods or commodities in and out of such places was slight at the outset. However, even modest degrees of economic self-sufficiency at the community level are a thing of the past. Today residents of resource outposts can shop by mail. As well, their dependence on the production of single communities such as pulp, uranium, fish and wheat make them vulnerable to both price and policy changes. Such places do not control their own economic destinies. Community sustainability is difficult to attain for Ft. Nelson, BC as long as its economic fate is tied to the market for chopsticks in Japan. Community sustainability is difficult to realize for Pine Falls, Manitoba as long as its economic lifeblood is subject to vacillations in environmental and trade regulations in the United States regarding the percent of recycled fibre that must be present in the pulp that community exports. Product substitution or discovery of cheaper sources of raw material elsewhere on the globe can jeopardize the continued viability of resource communities virtually overnight.

COUNTERPOINT: Economic self-sufficiency of resource-dependent communities is an extension of the myth of the independent, self-sufficient farmer, fisher and logger. Economic self-sufficiency at the community level never really existed. These places were developed solely to provide raw material inputs to large production centres in Canada, Britain, and the United States. On their own, resource-dependent communities never were sustainable. They always depended on imports for their material needs. Ironically, retail products created from locally extracted commodities usually need to be imported. In their present form, heavily resource-dependent places are likely not sustainable. However, this is because such places depend too heavily on only one use of their surrounding environment. Here forest dependent communities are the best example. Rural places that depend solely on fibre extraction are vulnerable to international pulp and lumber prices. Communities that rely on timber harvests, but also develop an economy around non-timber amenity values, and that develop subsistence and non-industrial forest products are less vulnerable to global trends that they cannot control. Granted these alternative forest uses cannot replace high paying jobs in timber extraction. However, they may produce enough employment to counteract reductions in timber-sector employment in cases where fibre extraction is determined to be at ecologically unsustainable levels.

Futility of Utility? Issue #2 - Globalization of culture

POINT: Globalization of culture brought on first by colonialism, then mass production, and more recently by technological developments in mass media dissemination has implications for the sustainability of resource-dependent communities. These resource outposts once had distinct cultures that grew out of their relationship with the surrounding environment. The culture of fishing villages, particularly in the Maritimes strongly reflects the connections to the sea. The institution of the family farm shaped the unique culture of agricultural communities. Logging and mining communities had their own unique institutions and forms of social organization. These unique cultures are being bombarded by 200 television channels, a nationwide radio network, as well as federal and provincial standards for school curricula and other social services. Despite their promise of choice and diversity, these trends breed a monolithic culture, with shared desires, aspirations, tastes and fashion. It is therefore futile to think that rural places will retain their unique and distinct characteristics given the onslaught of mass culture.

COUNTERPOINT: Culture is an evolutionary process. While many lament the passing of the unique cultures of resource-dependent places, there are elements of these cultures that by today's social standards are decidedly undesirable. Forest and mining communities, both historic and contemporary, are sometimes extremely stratified both in terms of income and status. Formerly, the internal hierarchies of the mill or the mine (upper management, middle management, skilled and unskilled labour) were mirrored in the economic and social stratification systems of communities. Today, due to unionization and the substitution of labour with capital, the divide is between those lucky enough to obtain high-paying resource sector jobs and those who are not. Resource communities remain a bastion of gender inequity. Women employees are notably absent from natural resource sectors, particularly in upper level management positions. These and

other dimensions of the unique cultures of resource-dependent communities are legacies that many would prefer to see disappear. Not all members of society have been sustained (read encouraged, supported and nourished) by the unique cultures found in resource-dependent communities. It is entirely possible that these places may retain some of their uniqueness even in the face of global massification of culture, while at the same time becoming more equitable in the sustenance they provide their citizens.

Futility or Utility? Issue #3 - Non-sustainability of natural capital withdrawals

POINT: Current withdrawals of natural capital are not being made on a sustainable basis. Some resources, by their very nature, are not renewable in a human time span. Communities that rely on non-renewable resources will not be sustainable in the long-run. Communities also fail when renewable resources are harvested at non-renewable rates. East coast fishing communities are the most obvious example, but forest and agricultural communities provide some examples as well. The relationship between community sustainability and the sustainability of natural capital withdrawals is a matter of degrees. Communities may be sustainable at certain levels, for certain time spans, depending on the level of resource extraction. However, rapid depletion of natural capital will lead to declines in local populations. In recent years, sawmills in BC, and the communities that depend upon them, have been scouring the prairies to the east for available fibre. While these communities may be sustainable in the long run without imported fibre, they are not likely sustainable at their current levels of population or production.

COUNTERPOINT: The fact that we have a poor track record on maintaining sustainable resource flows (so that these, in turn, may sustain communities) does not mean that it is impossible to determine sustainable harvest levels. Changes in the commodity prices, trade regulations, and consumer preferences make such calculations difficult to be sure, but if we can get economists and ecologists to work together I am confident that we could determine harvest levels that could be sustained over the long-term. To guarantee sustainability of both resource flows and communities, the assumptions built in to such models should err on the conservative side. The short-term profit-seeking behaviour of large firms are often blamed for non-sustainable harvests of renewable resources. However, corporate capitalism should not be made to shoulder the blame alone. Until recently, society has not demonstrated the political will to halt unsustainable practices. That is changing, however, and both government and industry are attempting to respond to public demands for certification of forest practices and products.

Futility or Utility? - Issue #4 - Ability of the boreal forest to sustain human communities

POINT: It is futile to discuss community sustainability in the context of the boreal forest ecosystem due to the low population densities that forest ecosystem has historically been able to maintain without massive imports of goods and services. The boreal forest is characterized by slow reproduction of biomass and low species diversity. Aboriginal communities that lived in this ecosystem before European contact were forced to disband at various times of the year because the natural system did not produce enough wild game or edible plants to sustain even moderate sized communities in small geographic areas. In order to be sustainable, Aboriginal communities needed to be flexible in size and mobile. These characteristics would be difficult to emulate in the modern, market economy.

COUNTERPOINT: In trying to imagine sustainable futures for today's forest-dependent communities the example of Aboriginal communities and their relationship to the land is a useful one. Both the traditions and philosophy of Aboriginal residents of the boreal forest revolve around living lightly on the land. Utilizing resources at a rate and in a manner such that the future productivity of such systems are not impaired is the essence of sustainable management. Also, Aboriginal Peoples were and are keen students of the natural system that sustains them. Historically, they observed natural cycles and shaped their use of the land according to what the land could produce. The paradigmatic shift toward ecosystem management based on natural disturbance regimes represents, to me, acknowledgement of the traditional wisdom of native elders in determining the productive capacity of the land first, and then structuring human use of the land so as not to exceed that productive capacity.

How Can Social Science Contribute to the Sustainability of Communities?

Social science has several roles to play as we attempt to move toward a sustainable society. First, social scientists have had, and should continue to have a role with respect to defining what sustainability means in the context of human systems. My attempt here to define the term sustainable community is a first cut at a broad brush definition. More work needs to be done, and some is ongoing. Several projects under the Sustainable Forest Management umbrella deal with this issue explicitly. As well there are both government (Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management) and non-government (Forest Stewardship Council) initiatives in process that attempt to define quantitative and qualitative indicators of community sustainability. Most of these initiatives are dominated by trained foresters or biological scientists. Social scientists need to become involved in these processes.

Secondly, we need to study resource-dependent communities that have declined or disappeared altogether. What were the causes for decline? Depletion of the resource base?; the expense of maintaining community infrastructure (by government or industry)?; inability to diversify the local economy beyond a single resource? A community is a functional form of social organization. There is nothing sacred in communities that any and all communities ever endeavoured must be maintained. When they fail to function, that is when transience, poverty, and unemployment are high, when gradu-

ation rates are low, when human health problems abound, and social pathologies such as crime and substance abuse are widespread, they should either be abandoned or reformed. Social scientists with expertise in community development can assist in creating strategies that might help sustain communities that at present are merely persisting.

Finally, we need to examine the relationship between resource-dependent communities and the larger social and economic contexts within which they exist. To study communities of place in isolation is to repeat the mistake we made in the way we used to study the forest. If we break a system down into its component parts and look only at pieces of the system, we will very likely miss some important dynamics at the system level. Understanding these macro-level relationships is crucial for determining the integrity of both the component parts and the system as a whole. So in the case of forest-dependent communities, we need to examine where these places fit in to commodity chains. How extensive are forward and backward economic linkages? How will capital flows, environmental regulations, trade de-regulation, and product certification affect the viability and ultimately the sustainability of these communities of place?

Conclusion

The concept of community is not unique to the social sciences. Ecologists use the term to describe complex webs of interaction between different species and non-animate components of ecosystems such as water and soil. Sustainable ecological communities are ones where nourishment and support are derived from the relationships in these complex webs. Sustainable human communities are not much different. They are places where their members are nourished, supported and encouraged by the web of social relations within communities, and the relationship between human and natural communities. The main point to make is that ecological communities and human communities evolve. We have not yet achieved community sustainability, but we may reach that desired state through the process of social evolution.

So, is the concept community sustainability futile given that rural, resource-dependent places are inextricably connected to larger, complex webs of social and economic institutions and processes? The answer is yes, if we expect to be able to create sustainable communities without creating a sustainable society as a whole. The answer is most definitely no, if we embrace positive evolutionary change toward such a sustainable society, while recognizing and respecting the limits of natural ecosystems.

References:

World Commission on Environment and Development. 1987. *Our Common Future*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

Williams, E. B. (ed). 1977. *The Scribner-Bantam English Dictionary*. Toronto. Bantam Books.

Sustainable Forestry Partnerships:

Forging a Network of Excellence

Conference Programme

Sustainable
Forest Management
Network of Centres
of Excellence

International Conference • March 8–10, 1996

Edmonton Convention Centre • Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
9797 Jasper Avenue