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Capacity Building Research WITH and FOR Communities By Lee Swanson, BNCE Project Leader and Associate Professor, Edwards School of Business, University of Saskatchewan

Good things can result when communities with social and economic development goals work with university researchers in meaningful ways designed to better understand the underlying conditions that might help or hinder community development efforts. The benefits to communities from working in partnership with researchers who are truly committed to working *with* and *for* communities rather than simply doing research *on* them includes the following:

- Communities can learn from the successes enjoyed by similar communities. They can also learn how others are meeting the challenges they face.
- Communities can share their successes while better understanding why they were successful and how they can lock-in their achievements and continue moving forward.
- New knowledge can be generated leading to new ways to solve existing problems.

The Building Northern Capacity through Entrepreneurship (BNCE) initiative is a five-year project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) along with the University of Saskatchewan's International Centre for Northern Governance and Development (ICNGD) and Edwards

School of Business. This study is focused on northern Saskatchewan communities, but it includes a comparison with the social and economic development experiences in northern Scandinavian communities that are small, remote, with primarily Indigenous populations, in cold climates, with geographic features similar to northern Saskatchewan, and that are sometimes impacted by natural resource industries working in their regions.

In partnership with participating communities from across northern Saskatchewan, the BNCE team is meeting with community members to better understand their aspirations for their communities; their perceptions of how entrepreneurship can impact the good life, wellbeing, and prosperity; and their insights into how entrepreneurship is functioning and can function in their communities. To gather this information, the BNCE team is holding focus group sessions with community members; using a *picture card exercise* to determine from where the goods and services consumed in communities come, and to where goods and services produced in the community go; using a *PhotoVoice exercise* during which people take pictures that they will later use to describe their perspectives on how entrepreneurship can help their community; and a *mapping exercise* to indicate their thoughts on their community's geographical reach. The BNCE team usually meets with 30 to 50 members of the community representing a wide range of professions, ages, interests, lengths of residency, and roles within the community.

In addition, the BNCE team meets with about 30 youth in each of the communities. They also participate through focus group sessions, an adapted version of the *picture card exercise*, and the mapping exercise. Instead of using *PhotoVoice*, the youth engage in an *OurVoice session* where they video record each other responding to important and supplied questions about their perspectives of their community. Unique to the youth meetings, the team asks about their personal plans for the future, whether they intend to leave their community after finishing school, and – if so – whether they anticipate returning and why. They are also asked what their community could do to attract people back who have left or who are planning to leave.

During and following the current data collection phase – which should end in March, 2016 – the BNCE team is distributing regular *Northern Sharing newsletters* to those who had expressed an interest in being informed about the project as it progresses. Edited videos of the youth responses to the interview questions they asked each other along with some of the *PhotoVoice* visuals and accompanying insights about entrepreneurship in northern communities will also be made available.

Beginning in 2016 communities will begin receiving *Research Communiques* that will outline the preliminary results from the work that was done in their community and in others across Saskatchewan's north. Also in 2016 the BNCE team intends to re-visit the communities to present a *Traveling Exhibit* detailing the overall results from the first phases of the research project. This will also provide communities with an opportunity to suggest enhancements to the information being presented about their home regions.

After the current phase of the project is finished, communities will have access to a body of knowledge about the *northern Saskatchewan entrepreneurial ecosystem*, including extensive information about both the formal and the undocumented economy, that they can then use to advance initiatives to benefit Saskatchewan's north. There is no current and accurate assessment available of the state of the economies in northern Saskatchewan as even the available statistical data does not adequately include

or measure all components of the northern economy. With a better understanding of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, communities should have a baseline to work from to develop both local and regional strategies to improve social and economic conditions.

Those who would like to learn more about the BNCE project, or who want to be added to the *Northern Sharing newsletter* and *Research Communique* distribution lists, can email the project team at northern.research@usask.ca (<mailto:northern.research@usask.ca>). They can also visit the website at <http://northerncapacity.com/> (<http://northerncapacity.com/>), the Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/BNCEproject> (<https://www.facebook.com/BNCEproject>) and the Twitter feed at @BNCEproject (<http://@BNCEproject>).



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