

IMAGINE BC

Dialogues on the Future of British Columbia

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Linking Social and Ecological Resilience To Strengthen the Environment

SEPTEMBER 10, 2008
REPORT



On Wednesday, September 10th, 2008, over 50 leaders from across industry sectors gathered at the Wosk Centre for Dialogue to listen and interact with Dr. Frances Westley on the role of Social Innovation (SI) in the pursuit of community resilience. Three invited panelists: Vickie Cammack (PLAN Institute), Mike Lewis (Centre for Community Enterprise) and Vince Verlaan (HB Lanarc) helped to focus and apply the concepts presented to their respective areas of expertise. The morning was both conceptually rich and practically focused, and participants found themselves challenged and inspired by the experience.

The morning began with Dr. Westley introducing Social Innovation as an “agency-based approach” to managing for resilience in Social Ecological Systems (SES). This approach is intentional, proactive and focused on the extent to which an innovation radically challenges the social structure it seeks to transcend. Towards this end, “Disruptive Innovations” tend to be subtle, planting seeds of profound change within the system it seeks to transform.

Social Innovation, according to Dr. Westley, can support sustainability initiatives along with the two other legs of this particular stool: Resilience and Vulnerability. In an action context, this means attending to capacity building, re-engaging vulnerable populations and raising the resilience of SES, while also focusing on the interactions among these areas. Fundamental to successful innovation is also an awareness of what is happening beneath the surface of language, dialogue, community participation, etc. — we must be aware of how power and authority are structured and how resources flow within the system we wish to affect.

This idea led into a summary presentation of the adaptive cycle, a conceptual model developed by C.S. Holling in the field of ecology and now widely used by a variety of scholars and practitioners for its descriptive and prescriptive capabilities. For example, the adaptive cycle describes how all complex systems, whether biological or social, go through a process of innovation, development, exploitation and conservation. “Creative destruction” occurs mainly at a certain point along the cycle and releases resources that

are locked up within the system in order to free energy for innovation. Two key insights that Dr. Westley shared with the group are:

1. that the transitions between phases (or the “psycho-social places/ processes” of innovation along the adaptive cycle) are critical to avoid getting caught in various traps, and
2. that innovation has no fixed address — the next innovation is required before the previous one has fully run its course.

Another key theme that emerged from the presentation was the power of stories. Indicating the importance of language, storytelling and awareness of our “mental models,” Dr. Westley told of a tribe in Eritrea, who maintain: “We lose our soul when we can’t tell our story.” Indeed, communicating the story is of paramount strategic importance in the context of diffusing and scaling up social innovations in the broader system context. New stories can powerfully connect various scales, which then allows us to connect the life conditions among individuals, organizations and resource flows, which can really shake things up.

Furthermore, Dr. Westley related the practice of scenario-based planning as a special form of storytelling from a desired or an avoidable future to the present. Indeed, she considers narratives to be on par with the scientific method as a research methodology and for her, storytelling includes language and other forms of knowledge creation, storage and transmission within a culture.

The key ingredients to self-transformation of a system can be summarized by the acronym GAIL, which includes: goal orientedness (intention); capacity for adaptation; integration of all parts; and latency (the capacity for system memory). It is also important to note that leverage points are specific to the system of intervention because we are always a part of the system we are trying to change.

A useful strategy for continuous innovation in organizations involves “management up-down”, where middle managers in organizations and/or communities question, frame, identify and sell ideas/info both from top-down and bottom-up perspectives to keep communications channels

open regarding the innovation that is occurring in the system. Finally, Dr. Westley shared with us a piece of wisdom from Edwin Land — that not only is the innovation itself an important aspect of SI, but also the preparation of expectations for what is possible among the population who the innovation is designed to serve.

Following her presentation, three panelists spoke briefly about what they had heard and what it meant in relation to their particular field of expertise.

Vickie Cammack spoke of a “Revolution of Belonging,” based on the fact that people in networks are invariably transformed by the virtue of their participation in it, and that we all, regardless of status or ability, experience belonging through contributing to the world in which we are a part.

Mike Lewis echoed Thomas Homer-Dixon’s call for the need to shift from a growth imperative to a resilience imperative, and spoke of the need to use SI to help local communities reinvent/transform themselves in light of the cross-cutting challenges facing all of us, NOW!

Vince Verlaan conveyed a stark challenge and imperative regarding addressing sustainability at ALL scales. For him, inclusion is the key to strong engagement and generative dialogue, which is, from his experience, the best way to meaningfully engage and mobilize social and community capital towards sustainability.

The panelists also asked provocative and pertinent questions for Dr. Westley and the attendees to consider, a selection of which are included here:

- How do we achieve the necessary diversity without broad participation?
- What is the role of values and beliefs in social innovation?
- What is the specific relationship between re-localization and community resilience?
- How central are democracy and participation to the social innovation process?
- How can we use social innovation to stimulate radical change among leaders and policy makers?
- How do we generate the clarity and will to think, do and learn innovatively and together?
- Are stories the key to creating the necessary mind shifts towards sustainability?

Following these questions in an exchange with the larger group, Dr. Westley clarified how she sees the role of social capital and participation in social innovation. According to her, social capital is incredibly important, and it must be mobilized in order to be effective. Similarly, participation is an essential community value, however, it must be seen as a means first and as an end in itself second in order to allow the selection and development of successful innovations.

Indeed, a useful exercise at the community level is to juxtapose intention with participation at the outset of a community process in order to clarify the role that participation has in that particular instance. Her advice in this regard: “Hold the paradox!” Same goes with conflict — it can have a very important role to play in moving a system forward if we can step back and listen to what the conflict is saying about where/how the system wants to move. One participant noted the value of honesty and courage in cultures of change in any case, whether in taking a different attitude towards conflict, or simply being a stand for change in any system.

Ending on a very positive and hopeful note, another participant spoke eloquently of the importance of opening up the interior space of individuals, organizations and communities in order to allow social innovations to come forth and flourish. The arts and artists can play a significant role in this regard, in that they create the space for possible futures to emerge through imagination and creativity. Art, creativity and playfulness are also important ways in which to include marginal and/or vulnerable populations, thus strengthening that leg of the stool that accompanies resilience and innovation.

Appendix One — Invitation

IMAGINE BC

Dialogues on the Future of British Columbia
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

You are invited to:

Linking Social and Ecological Resilience to Strengthen the Environment with Dr. Frances Westley

Wednesday, September 10, 9 am–12:30 pm

Morris J Wosk Centre for Dialogue, Simon Fraser University, Concourse Level
580 West Hastings Street, Vancouver, BC

Hosted and Co-sponsored by Simon Fraser University's Imagine BC, the
Centre for Community Enterprise and PLAN Institute for Caring Citizenship

This workshop creates an opportunity for leaders from the social, economic
and environmental sectors to explore the meaning and implications of
resilience theory as it informs ecological, social and economic change. It
will provide an opportunity for reflection and discussion as changes related
to climate and energy converge with the need to address deeply entrenched
social challenges.

Please note: This invitation is non-transferable.

Please RSVP by September 5, 2008

To register [click here](#)

For more information, please call 778-782-7925 or email dialogue-info@sfu.ca



SFU

With thanks to
our sponsors:



Imagine BC is a five-year series of dialogues that seeks to create a non-partisan forum for diverse perspectives about the future of the province. Imagine BC brings a forward-thinking perspective to examining British Columbia's future. The program is an initiative of Dialogue Programs in Continuing Studies at Simon Fraser University, in association with the Morris J Wosk Centre for Dialogue.

Appendix Two – Suggested Reading

Rob Hopkins. 2008. *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*. Green Books, UK.

Brian Walker and David Salt. 2006. *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World*. Island Press.

Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Patton. 2006. *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*. Random House. Canada.

Thomas Homer-Dixon. 2006. *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization*. Island Press. Washington, DC.

Appendix Three – Sponsor Descriptions

Imagine BC is a five-year series of dialogues convened by Simon Fraser University’s Dialogue Program that seeks to create a forum for diverse perspectives about the future of the province. By asking citizens, leaders and experts to engage in meaningful dialogue and to collectively imagine the kind of future we want in the province, the Imagine BC process generates provocative and constructive visions to bring about real social change, one conversation at a time.

The Centre for Community Enterprise provides inspiring, practical, and provocative expertise and resources in starting and strengthening CED organizations, revitalizing communities, developing community-minded businesses, CED curriculum design and delivery, and publishing - including the quarterly CED magazine *Making Waves*. A broad network of experienced CED practitioners serve communities throughout Canada and abroad through training, technical assistance, research, and a variety of other services and products.

The PLAN Institute for Caring Citizenship creates networks, develops resources, cultivates innovation and promotes thinking to foster the contribution of people who are isolated and marginalized. Whether in training or consulting activities, PLAN Institute has an inspiring and skilled team that combine real world experience with theory and tested resources to create inspirational and practical learning experiences, policy and regulatory reform, organizational transformation, and the scaling up of sustainability and social innovations

IMAGINE BC is a series of annual dialogues presented by Simon Fraser University's Dialogue Programs, Continuing Studies that has set out to change the way British Columbians think and talk about the future of their province.

IMAGINE BC gratefully acknowledges the support of the North Growth Foundation, the Province of British Columbia, and **IMAGINE BC**'s Advisory Council.

NORTH GROWTH
F O U N D A T I O N



IMAGINE BC
c/o Morris J Wosk Centre for Dialogue
Simon Fraser University Vancouver
515 West Hastings Street
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6B 5K3

www.imaginebc.ca | imaginebc-info@sfu.ca