



## **Virtual PLACE Check-In**

November 20, 2020

---

## **Forum Report**

## **Challenge and Opportunity: Community Champions' Resilience Strategies in Coping with the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Community champions across Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) are finding ways to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic slow down by reorganizing their organizations and communities. They are renovating their infrastructure, finding new funding, innovating with new technologies, and evaluating their business strategies. On November 20, 2020, 23 community champions, four representatives from the provincial and federal government and other support sectors, and 10 university representatives (including researchers, staff, and graduate students from Memorial University) digitally gathered for a PLACE Check-In forum to share and reflect on their experiences in navigating their community and businesses during the pandemic. The session was organized by Joanie Cranston from the Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital, Bruna Brito, a Memorial University masters student in Sociology, and Dr. Brennan Lowery and Dr. Natalie Slawinski of the Faculty of Business Administration at Memorial, as part of the development of the PLACE Model project which aims to help revitalize rural NL through social enterprise.

Natalie opened the discussion with a reflection from the first PLACE Dialogues forum on Fogo Island in 2018. She expressed that community champions have inspired her to further study social enterprise in the province since “many people care about and come back to their place, not only building their own community, but supporting each other and nurturing other champions, to change, adapt, and to make their communities more resilient.”

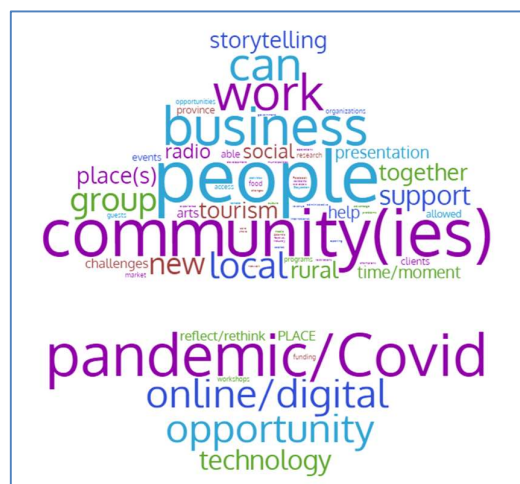
In addition to its research goals, the project has helped to connect social entrepreneurs and community development practitioners across the province. Amy Rowsell of Shorefast reflected on the Fogo Island workshop, sharing that “it was nice to be in a room with so many people who share similar interests and challenges. I could feel a real sense of camaraderie although we are different in terms of work and background.” Given the pandemic-related challenges we have all endured over the past nine months, the need to strengthen our communities and support and learn from each other has become even more significant.

### **Challenges and Reorganization**

In the face of the looming threat of Covid-19 and related social and economic impacts, community activists and social entrepreneurs across NL have faced great challenges in maintaining their organizations. Small businesses and workers have experienced different impacts in the transition to the Covid economy, as highlighted by Fogo Island residents' reflections about ferry captains' strikes that interrupted supply chains for local businesses. Many social enterprises that work in tourism have

been forced to adapt to dramatic drops in visitation and revenue. While global mobility has been put on hold, it has become clear to experiential tourism businesses that they have to find strategies to substitute international and interprovincial tourism markets. Jennifer Charles of Wild Cove Wellness explained that while the staycationer market has somewhat boosted tourism volumes, it only partially compensates for the loss of revenue from international and interprovincial travellers. Some businesses did reopen, but the revenue barely covered their costs because of limited customers.

Despite these challenges, forum participants were keen to find solutions. There was a common sentiment among the community champions in attendance that the pandemic-related disruptions can offer a window of opportunity for social enterprises to step back from their routines and revitalize their organizations. This is reflected in the words commonly used by participants, shown in the following Figure, such as “community”, “people”, “together”, and “opportunity”. These common themes reiterate the importance of collective action to support each other during these challenging times.



Common phrases mentioned by workshop participants, based on listed popular words (freq >2) in meeting minutes.

Community champions described three reorganization activities that they undertook during the pandemic restrictions:

1. **Making improvements.** When travel restrictions were first put in place, many social entrepreneurs decided to use this opportunity to make improvements to their local infrastructure, like painting and renovating their buildings.
2. **Responding to digital opportunities.** Some organizations and businesses described how they introduced innovations to cope with the situation and explore unexpected opportunities. In this context, the intersection between community and technology played a vital role. Barbara Barter, the former mayor of Burgeo, explained that many seniors who were not previously tech-savvy are now learning internet skills from their peers, particularly through Facebook. This peer training served as a stepping stone for local seniors to do other things online, such as getting news updates and shopping. Wilma Hartmann, co-owner of the Anchor Inn Hotel & Suites in Twillingate, explained that her town, in coping with the pandemic restrictions, managed to digitally

stream its community-based festivals, allowing them to grow their audience. “It felt like a big global community coming together”, she said.

Carolyn Wakeham, Community Ecosystem Innovation Coordinator at The Commons in Bonavista, explained that the coworking space had only recently reopened and quickly managed to reconfigure its space to cater to people working or studying remotely. This development inspired The Commons to attract seasonal homeowners to use its space and visit the area for longer periods, while also enhancing opportunities for newcomers to live and work in the region year-round.

- 3. Reflecting on long-term visions.** Community champions also used this period of a business slowdown to reflect on their routines and long-term strategies. For example, reflecting from her experience in coping with the pandemic, Joan Cranston of the Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital Heritage Corporation explained that social entrepreneurs need to consider business diversification and explore new market niches.

Kimberly Orren of Fishing for Success in Petty Harbour reported from her breakout group discussion that community champions believe that the quarantine period was “an opportunity for organizations to sit back and examine their priorities, and gave them time to actually search out funding that they would not have had an opportunity to search out before, and move forward stronger”. To this, David Bradley, Chair of the Bonavista Historic Townscape Foundation, reminded us that “while community organizations have obviously experienced severe difficulties during the pandemic, many have fared better than private businesses because they have greater access to public supports of various types, including enhanced program funding from federal and provincial governments. Some could also count on continued support from sponsors and donors”.

With these reorganization activities, Wilma Hartmann reflected that the pandemic slowdown gives community organizers the time to “prepare the soil” while waiting for quarantine to end. Alex Hickey of St. Jacques Island Heritage Corporation added that such reorganization and regrouping activities “will help the organization in the long term”.

With these accelerating dynamics taking place in community organizations, Diane Hodge-Burt from Community Business Development Corporation (CBDC) Trinity Conception witnessed growth in her consultation hours which expanded into non-clients. She reminded the group that CBDCs had to respond quickly and find “new ways to provide financial and technical support to rural communities while, at the same time, most of the organizations

needed to do a massive outreach to their clients and understand their new needs” to support their long term visions.

### **Pursuing Community-Driven Solutions**

This urge to understand the new needs of organizations led community champions to reflect and rethink their previous ways of managing their enterprise. Getting the community involved is crucial since small businesses depend on their communities for survival, and vice versa. Renee Pilgrim, an acupuncturist in St. Anthony, summarized the discussion in her breakout group by stating that the loss of the tourism industry had shown the power of community self-reliance. Josh Smee, CEO of Food First NL also experienced community empowerment, noting that “a network of people rose during the pandemic and they became emergency support. This brings new ways of thinking: smaller grassroots support driving the conversation for change, instead of sticking with old bureaucratic ways.”

Participants also discussed issues of equity and access that were exposed by the pandemic. Craig Pollett of Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador explained that many town councils have only basic administrative capacity and operations, which the pandemic strained while highlighting the importance of informal relationships and social capital for running communities. Commenting on the shift from in-person to virtual engagement sessions, Jane Walker of Union House Arts in Port Union stressed that “we can no longer make excuses for excluding rural communities from workshops, programs, and support services. Covid has shown that it is possible to reach these communities through technology, and that will need to continue after the pandemic is over.” Once in-person engagement sessions are possible again, this experience can help ensure equitable access for rural residents to events that are held in urban centres.

In the last session of the Check-In, participants discussed potential themes and topics to be raised in the in-person PLACE Dialogues that will hopefully take place in May 2021 in Norris Point. Joan Cranston, who will host this event at the Old Cottage Hospital, suggested food security as a potential theme for 2021. Other suggestions included community radio, arts, and rural technology, as well as the development of public policy recommendations to inform provincial and federal government decision-making related to rural economic development. We look forward to continuing this conversation next year, hopefully in person!

See you in Norris Point in 2021!

---

# Participants

---

## **Central Newfoundland**

1. Wilma Hartmann, Anchor Inn Hotel, Twillingate.
2. Alex Hickey, St. Jacques Island Heritage Corporation.
3. Winston Perry, Cape Freels Development Association/Town of New-Wes-Valley.
4. Amy Rowsell, Shorefast, Fogo Island.
5. Jennifer Charles, Wild Cove Wellness, Fogo Island.

## **Labrador**

6. Darren Dinsmore, Happy Valley Baptist Church.

## **Western Newfoundland**

7. Olivia Ball, artist, Norris Point/Woody Point.
8. Barbara Barter, Town of Burgeo.
9. Joanie Cranston, Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital Heritage Corporation.
10. Renee Pilgrim, Acupuncturist, St. Anthony.
11. Trina Reed, Under the Stump/Town of Rocky Harbour.
12. Ian Stone, Taste of Gros Morne/Town of Norris Point.
13. Ivan White, Councillor of Qalipu First Nation, Flat Bay.

## **Eastern Newfoundland**

14. David Bradley, Bonavista Historic Townscape Foundation.
15. Elizabeth Murphy, Lyvyer's Lot Economusee.
16. Edith Samson, Sir William Ford Coaker Heritage Foundation.
17. Carolyn Wakeham, The Commons, Bonavista.
18. Jane Walker, Union House Arts, Port Union.

## **Avalon Region, Newfoundland.**

19. Diane Hodge-Burt, CBDC Trinity-Conception.
20. Ken Kavanagh, Bell Island.
21. Dave Lank, Entrepreneur.
22. Mallery McGrath, Town of Branch.
23. Kimberly Orren, Fishing for Success, Petty Harbour.

## **Government / Support Sector**

24. Andrea O'Brien, Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador.
25. Manuel Hackett, Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency.
26. Craig Pollett, Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador.
27. Joshua Smee, Food First NL.

## **Memorial University / Research**

28. Rob Greenwood, Director, Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development.



29. Bojan Furst, Knowledge Mobilization Manager, Harris Centre
30. Chris Paterson, Knowledge Mobilization Coordinator, Harris Centre
31. Nicole Helwig, Centre for Social Enterprise.
32. Natalie Slawinski, Principal investigator, Future Oceans and Coastal Infrastructures.
33. Ario Seto, Post-doctoral fellow, Future Oceans and Coastal Infrastructures.
34. Brennan Lowery, Post-doctoral fellow, Future Oceans and Coastal Infrastructures.
35. Bruna Brito, Master's student, Future Oceans and Coastal Infrastructures.
36. Jennifer Brenton, PhD student, Future Oceans and Coastal Infrastructures.
37. Charlotte Cranston, Master's student, Scotland.