

Resisting Rural Resettlement on the Burin Peninsula: A PLACE Case Study of Placentia West Development Association

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Formed in staunch defiance of the Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) resettlement program, Placentia West Development Association (PWDA) has been a strong, persistent force for rural resilience along the west coast of Placentia Bay, NL for the past five decades. The five pillars of the PLACE Framework—**promote community leaders, link divergent perspectives, amplify local capacities and assets, convey compelling stories, and engage both/and thinking**—shed light on PWDA's resilience.



Beginning in the late 1960s, a grassroots coalition of community leaders banded together to enhance the vibrancy and viability of their region and to fight further depopulation from the provincial government's resettlement program. The group formally established in 1972 as the Fortune Bay-Placentia West Development Association.

In the early 1970s, a total of 55 development associations were formed across the province, successfully pressuring government to shift its approach from rural resettlement to rural development. By 1979, the activities of the Fortune Bay-Placentia West Development Association had grown so much that the group split into two independent development associations. PWDA was born, with a mission to promote the social and economic

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development of the Placentia West region (Placentia West); 10 small communities stretching 38 kms from Red Harbour to Monkstown, including Petite Forte, South East Bight and Paradise.

PWDA was no stranger to the hardships of economic development in rural Newfoundland. Formed in the immediate aftermath of resettlement, PWDA has navigated the moral, financial, and cultural hardships of resettlement and the cod moratorium. Despite these challenges, PWDA maintained a commitment to supporting the economic and cultural richness of its region through a deep belief in its vibrancy and potential, and a unique commitment to social enterprise.

Social Enterprise Pioneers

In the wake of resettlement, rural places felt the urgency to create local jobs as a measurable way to prove their viability. In this context, job creation and place-based economic development became essential for fostering stronger connections between people, their communities, and their place. Like many regions in the province prior to the moratorium, the fishery was the backbone of employment and economic activity in Placentia West. By the mid-1970s, the total catch in the area had surpassed the processing capacity of the nearest fish plant, leaving local fishermen without a market for their catch. PWDA saw the need for a holistic approach that not only created jobs but also enhanced the quality of life for surrounding communities. They proposed a new, purpose-built fish plant in Placentia West.

Baine Harbour Fish Plant opened in 1977 as PWDA's first major job creation initiative. As a community-built social enterprise, Baine Harbour Fish Plant generated greater income for fishers; new jobs for plant workers, maintenance and management staff; and greater economic success for the region at large. The initiative succeeded largely because PWDA assembled a dedicated and influential team of local community champions who volunteered their time and worked tirelessly to bring the vision to life. This experience became a testament to PWDA and the local communities of the importance of **promoting community leaders**.

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“It wasn’t called social enterprise back then,” mused Elizabeth Murphy, long-standing PWDA Board Chair. Born and raised in the Placentia West community of Rushoon, as a young woman Murphy left home to pursue her teaching career. But she returned just a few years later, accepting a full-time position at the local school in Rushoon. It was then Murphy began volunteering with the PWDA Craft Committee, “I didn’t know then it would be a 40-year job,” she laughed. Murphy remembered the success of the Baine Harbour Fish Plant, and the excitement and opportunity that accompanied the arrival of MUN Extension Services (MUN Extension) in Placentia West that same year.

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As an outreach division of Memorial University of Newfoundland, MUN Extension was instrumental in “galvanizing the economic success of rural NL communities following resettlement,” recounted Murphy. In 1977,

PWDA jumped at the opportunity to invite the fresh insights of this supportive and specialized group from outside the region (**link diverse perspectives**). Immediately, MUN Extension recognized the exceptionality of the PWDA Craft Committee—the remarkably high-quality crafts, such as knitted mittens, custom lace, and hooked rugs, and the notable talent of its predominantly female membership. MUN Extension encouraged a group within the Craft Committee to commercialize and helped them through the process. Placentia West Mat Makers were established, a co-op model of social enterprise that “pioneered new ideas in the region: that women could make money at home using skills they already had,” boasted Murphy.

Fish processing and crafting weren’t the only burgeoning industries in Placentia West at that time. PWDA identified the growing popularity of a local salmon river running through the resettled community of Bay de L’eau. Local fisheries officers worked along the Bay de L’eau River, “they knew there were people fishing salmon in that area and where they were coming from”, recalled Murphy.

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PWDA recognized that Newfoundlanders from other communities were travelling to the area to salmon fish. Additionally, former residents who had moved away during resettlement, were coming back to the region to visit. They all needed a place to stay. In the early 1980s, however, tourism in rural NL was not considered a viable industry. “The Department of Tourism was adamant that rural Newfoundland was not a place that people

needed to see. We weren't even allowed to refer to other Newfoundlanders as tourists," Murphy recalled. But PWDA thought differently. They saw a third opportunity for social enterprise in Placentia West, an opportunity to **amplify local capacities and assets** by redefining their region as a tourism destination for both intra- and inter-provincial visitors. By 1984, PWDA successfully gained the funding to build three tourist cabins along the Bay de L'eau River. The construction and operation of the cabins created new jobs for builders, cleaners, and maintenance workers, and proceeds fed back into PWDA. But furthermore, the launch of a new tourism industry brought renewed hope for the region. "Though some locals were aging out of fishery, they could still host a tourist by renting out a cabin or driving someone around the community," Murphy explained.

With the launch of Baine Harbour Fish Plant, Placentia West Mat Makers and Bay de L'eau Cabins, PWDA bolstered the cultural and economic capacity of the region. PWDA quickly gained a reputation for their innovative social enterprise solutions, relentless perseverance, and tenacious commitment to fighting for the people and the future of Placentia West.

Global Hardships & Bad Press

Alongside social enterprise success, the 1980s brought an onslaught of hardships for PWDA. The global economic recession sent interest rates skyrocketing and caused mass job loss across the country. Placentia West residents who had been working away, flooded back to the region in search of refuge and employment. While job demand soared, the cod stocks began to drop. "We had barely recovered from the 80s downturn when the fishery started to decline," recalled Murphy. With less and less fish coming in for processing, Baine Harbour Fish Plant closed.

To keep the region afloat, PWDA expanded its business endeavors and initiated more projects, increasing applications for government grants. This strategy not only supported their operations but also created temporary job opportunities for local residents. Funding spanned a wide range of projects: from committee coordinators to trades workers, and from maintenance tasks to bookkeeping. It was a key component of many household incomes, providing job experience, training, and a contribution to the progress of the region. "When the development association had some funding to hire a worker, that work was a part of the economic success of the entire community," Murphy reiterated. But some community members were skeptical about the grant recipients' abilities, and about PWDA's efforts to support them. The local media chimed in, amplifying the negativity.

Murphy recalled, “There was a narrative in the media that we were spending all our time and money moving rocks from the south side to the north side and back again...they didn’t see the long-term benefits of the employment grants.”

Hardships endured, but so did PWDA. By the early 1990s, the hard work of the PWDA was paying off. With two decades of **promoting community champions, linking diverse perspectives, and amplifying local capacities and assets**, PWDA thought differently about the future economics of Placentia West and the role they would play to ensure its success. While the rest of the province reeled with the shock of the moratorium, PWDA was in a position to **engage both/and thinking**, to take a series of strategic risks to further serve the long-term viability of the region.

Break it Down to Build Something Better

In 1992, the Craft Committee approached PWDA with a request: to establish a craft shop in Placentia West. Even with the widespread success of the Placentia West Mat Makers

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and other talented crafters in the region, producers still worked and sold their wares from home without stable inventory or a store front. At the same time, PWDA itself needed a larger headquarters. Once again, they **assessed local capacities and assets**. The moratorium had

thrown the NL economy into a slump, dramatically slowing intra-provincial tourism; thus, even with the success of the Bay de L’eau cabins, PWDA decided to downsize the business. “The purpose is not to keep what you have,” Murphy shared, “but to break it down, take it apart, and build something better” (**engage both/and thinking**). One of the three cabins was transported over the highway to PWDA’s lot at the center of the region. It was expanded upon and reopened as the Development Association Building and Craft Shop on May 17 that year. “It was the first time all Placentia West crafts were represented in a store front,” recalled Murphy proudly.

By 1995, the NL government cut all operational funding to development associations throughout the province. “It was said that development associations were not capable of making decisions, that there was no leadership capacity in the communities, a complete waste of government money,” recalled Murphy. But PWDA knew better. Another setback signalled another opportunity was just around the corner. No sooner had PWDA opened the Development Association Building and Craft Shop than travellers began to stop in,

“looking for a cup of tea,” Murphy laughed. For those travelling down the highway, there was nowhere to stop for a hot beverage or bite to eat, and the Development Association Building was the first along the road that was open. “The women working in the craft shop would make visitors a cup of tea from their meeting supplies. Then they started trying out different recipes,” recalled Murphy. It wasn’t long before plans were made to sell the second Bay de L’eau cabin to fund the relocation of the third cabin to the PWDA lot (**engage both/and thinking**). The relocated cabin became yet another social enterprise for the region, the Tea Rose Restaurant. The Tea Rose Restaurant opened its doors to the public in 1999, employing local women from the community with a passion for cooking and hospitality.

Security for the Long-Term

Despite their success and momentum, by 2010 PWDA faced a difficult decision. Funds were at an all-time low, the Development Association building could no longer be kept up, and without any operational support from government, PWDA considered closing down for good. Around this same time, concerns were growing around the availability of health care services in the area. The region had only a small medical clinic and it was slated to close. Campaigning efforts for a new clinic had been met with little success. Once again, PWDA scanned its environment and **engaged both/and thinking** in search of opportunities. They identified yet another asset they could break down for the good of building something better. Murphy recalled the conversation around the table, “Why not sell the building we can’t afford to operate and it can become the new clinic?” (**amplify local capacities and assets**). So, they did.

PWDA subdivided their lot and the Department of Health agreed to purchase the Development Association and Craft Shop building to renovate and reopen as the new Regional Health Care Clinic for Placentia West. By 2013 the sale closed, and the majority of the funds were re-invested into the Tea Rose Restaurant, more than doubling the size of the building to make space for a new social enterprise initiative, an économusée®.

The économusée® was not a stand-alone business, but a new way of conceptualizing all of PWDA’s businesses and initiatives under the umbrella of heritage preservation through storytelling. In 2015, the économusée® launched as Livyer’s Lot Heritage Site. Within it, the craft shop reopened, but this time within space designed to **convey the compelling stories** of PWDA, particularly those stories wrapped up in the regions’ long and successful history of crafting. “The philosophy of an économusée®,” stated Murphy, “is a

craft is not intended to be sold outside its story.” As an économusée®, Livyer’s Lot Heritage Site: sold local crafts, hosted the stories of where (and from whom) the crafts came, displayed the letters of happy customers from all over the world, offered crafting demonstrations, highlighted profiles of prominent crafters in the region, and paid homage to the success of the Placentia West Mat Makers. The remaining proceeds from the building sale went towards creating a community garden space, farmer’s market, and re-establishing PWDA’s financial accounts to enable its continued fight for the cultural and economic wellbeing of Placentia West well into the future.

Future Success and Succession

2017 brought the end of an important chapter for PWDA, the dissolution of the Placentia West Mat Makers. The closure came not because the business was unsuccessful, but, “because they couldn’t keep up with the demand,” Murphy shared. The Placentia West Mat Makers dissolution was a potent reflection of PWDA’s overall situation: demand and enthusiasm for their products and services were strong, but the association’s ability to meet the demand was less and less with each passing year. “Producers were getting older, aging out, and passing away; younger members had left the region in search of work during the moratorium,” Murphy lamented. Despite all that had been built, established, won, and accomplished, the end of the Placentia West Mat Makers was a reminder that PWDA was still to face their greatest challenge to date: as Murphy quoted from a folk song by Laurie Lewis, “Who will mind the home fires when I’m gone from here?” She continued, “This is the biggest challenge to all our communities, and the one consuming most of my time as we try to preserve the cultural and social infrastructure that community volunteers have built all these years.”

Having thought long and hard about the future, it was clear to PWDA, “Young people are gone from our communities, and there will be no third generation of development

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associations if we don’t find ways to attract them back,” shared Murphy. At the heart of the matter, however, was the same issue that had motivated the founding of PWDA back in the 1960s, the very narrative upon which the resettlement movement was based: that rural NL is not a place to which anyone should want to belong. It was time to start **Conveying** a new **compelling story**, a story truer and more convincing than the one used for decades to erode the confidence and place-based connection of rural Newfoundlanders. “We need to start telling the story of why people do choose to live

here,” insisted Murphy. She continued, “As rural Newfoundlanders, we can’t be constantly pushing our young people to go to college, and university, and not to come back. We have to start saying ‘this is the place you should be’.”

PWDA started taking a ‘tourism approach’ to retain the local population and attract new residents, emphasizing the connection to nature, the opportunity to raise children in slower-paced environments, as well as business opportunities in farming, wind energy, fish farming, and craft. PWDA worked to reach young people as well as those approaching early retirement who still had a lot to give to community. “Unless we ask their concerns,” Murphy asserted, “we can’t address them.”

The work of PWDA continues today, in an ongoing, hopeful effort to attract and mobilize the right community leaders to take the reins and champion PWDA into a long and prosperous future. “The key is to not let those on the outside defeat your sense of purpose,” concluded Murphy of the success of PWDA to date. “The purpose was to keep against the forces of resettlement,” she continued, “and in defiance of defeat, we fought to stay. And so far, we’re still here.” PWDA did far more than resist the forces of resettlement. Through relentless passion, unwavering commitment, hard work, and a ton of tenacity, PWDA has exemplified how place-based social enterprise can fuel, fund, and fight to sustain the small places that mean the most. By shining a light on how PWDA Promoted community leaders, Linked diverse perspectives, Amplified local capacities and assets, Conveyed compelling stories, and Engaged both/and thinking in Placentia West, we recognize the PLACE Framework as an effective tool for community champions with the courage to fight for rural resilience in their own corners of the world.