

# Communication Issues for Volunteer Groups in Rural Canada

Lindsay Lyghtle  
Research Assistant  
Rural and Small Town Programme  
Mount Allison University

Project Report Prepared for David Bruce  
Communications Theme Group Leader  
New Rural Economy Project

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## **Introduction**

Volunteer groups play a key role in Canadian society. They are comprised of those dedicated individuals who give their extra time to enhance and develop both the social and economic sectors of their communities. This paper will examine the challenges that volunteer groups face in enhancing their capacity to use a variety of communication tools, especially those involving new technologies. It will also focus on general and specific issues related to the role of volunteer groups in rural areas and the problems they face with various forms of communication within their organizations and in their surrounding communities.

A case study of Springhill, Nova Scotia is used to help better understand organizations and the types of technology they are using and how they adopt and create their current methods of communication using this technology. This case study will be supported by a literature review, outlining the various aspects which are important for volunteer groups to effectively communicate and enhance social cohesion and development within their community, and Canadian data which shows that Springhill volunteer groups have similar needs to other volunteer organizations in the country. The paper concludes by examining and discussing the Springhill case study findings in relation to the literature review, while providing some recommendations as to how voluntary organizations in Springhill might work towards maximizing their current forms of technology.

## **Volunteer Groups in Rural Canada**

Volunteer groups are a critical aspect of Canadian society. Numbers show that there are “6.5 million Canadians actively volunteering in over 175,000 voluntary organizations both in Canada and around the world”(Government of Canada, 2001). The voluntary sector within Canada “enables civic participation and encourages citizens to become engaged in their society and communities, creating organizations which are a force for social cohesion, and a force for stability and growth” (Government of Canada, 2001).

These volunteer groups play a vital role within the larger community both on a local, provincial and global level (World Wide Volunteer, 2003). The people who make up volunteer groups are those dedicated individuals within a community, who are interested in giving their time, free of charge, to try and make a difference within their community. Throughout history such means of volunteering have been an essential “instrument of social cohesion and inclusion, and a key contributor to building social capacity” within communities (World Wide Volunteer, 2003).

Although it is proven that volunteer groups are the “fabric of the community,” or the “glue which holds together many disparate parts,” these organizations are facing several challenges, limiting their overall effect on their community (Bruce, Jordan and Halseth 1999). Such challenges range from declining membership numbers, ageing populations, limited social support and a lack of funding. It is through new means of communication and Government services and programs, that rural volunteer groups must learn to use new technologies to help them better enhance and serve not only those in their organizations, but also the clients, funders and the larger

community.

Membership in many volunteer organizations is declining faster than new members are being recruited. In many cases, membership numbers have dropped due to a change in services offered by the organization, causing members to leave, while some organizations have just ceased to exist. In other cases numbers have declined due to death in an ageing population. Overall, membership numbers are declining for most organizations (Bruce, Jordan and Halseth 1999; Innovative Services Data). Another challenge is a lack of social support from within the community. A lack of social support can range from little or no participation from members to that of little moral support towards the goals or mission of the organization. No funding from the community or from local government is another challenge many organizations have to face. (Bruce, Jordan and Halseth 1999)

Another important factor for organizations is the ability for volunteers to learn together, not only as individuals, but as a team, which helps to increase their learning capacity. When teams (organizations) learn together they go through several different phases, one of these being the synergistic learning mode. This mode is when “members create knowledge mutually,” which in most cases contributes to the team’s overall knowledge. Such learning also helps to develop community learning, as the team’s new knowledge is integrated into their personal lives and activities, and can be used outside of the group in the larger community. (Kasl, 2001)

Kasl also makes the distinction between learning and task, which is important for organizations to understand. Such problems between learning and task arise when groups “impose order too quickly in order to escape members’ fear of chaos or when running out of time, which prevents themselves from learning” (Kasl, 2001). It is when such outcomes occur that organizations perceive their goals as the accomplishment of a task and not the learning that is occurring. It is when the team can recognize the difference between these two objectives that they are able to move from the task to collective learning from the task. When this occurs, they truly will be in a learning mode due to their synergistic behaviour. Such behaviour helps the organization and larger community to learn and work together as a cohesive unit.

With such problems as declining membership and a lack of funding, it becomes an important priority for the government to help find solutions for voluntary organizations to overcome such issues. The federal government has created such programs as VolNet and The Canadian Volunteerism Initiative, as a few examples, in order to assist voluntary organizations with becoming familiar with new forms of technology and to assist them in overcoming problems they are facing.

VolNet was a four year, \$20 million program which was designed to help get voluntary organizations connected to the Internet. It was created within Industry Canada, to deliver discounted computer equipment, free Internet access for one year and the necessary skills to use the technology, all in an attempt to expand the technology capacity of the voluntary sector. Industry Canada was successful in recruiting 11,152 voluntary organizations into its program

from across Canada. The goals of the VolNet program were to help make Canada one of the most connected countries in the world and to attempt to break down the barriers towards Internet usage caused by social inequalities such as race, ethnicity, gender and poverty. The overall program was successful in creating and building capacity by both providing participants with the skills necessary to use the technology and to apply it within society for the creation of jobs within their communities, while also allowing voluntary organizations a chance to obtain computer hardware which they may not otherwise have been able to afford. (Government of Canada, 2002)

The Canadian Volunteerism Initiative is another federal government program designed to “examine new ways of working together and strengthening the relationship of the volunteer sector and the government” and to encourage more people to work in and help in the voluntary sector (Canadian Volunteerism Initiative). A final report developed from this study identified four concerns that need to be addressed in order to help create a strong and more participatory volunteer sector and outlined strategies to address them. The first is the importance of networking and information exchange. Networking and information sharing must occur with the available technology in order for volunteer groups to truly benefit. Second, research and innovation projects must take place. Third there must be the needed leadership and engagement on the part of the organizations and participants. The fourth is promotion, recognition and outreach. These provide the thanks and promote the benefits of volunteerism to Canada. Together these actions will help redevelop and build a strong voluntary sector, that is ready to help development within the new economy. (Government of Canada, 2001)

### **Communication and its Relationship with the Voluntary Sector**

We all use different forms of communication everyday, whether it is talking to the person sitting beside you, listening to the radio or watching TV, we all communicate. Communication is not just the transmission of information or the medium used to transfer, it also includes who receives these messages that we wish to send out, the topic of conversation, who is speaking, who is able to participate and if the form of communication is inclusive or exclusive (Emke, forthcoming). All of these aspects make up communication. Without communication development is unable to occur and without development, communities cease to expand and learning stops. You need to have constant communication in order for positive change to occur within a community.

Emke looks at the communication process and assesses various ways it “acts” in our society: as glue, oil, and a web. Communication, he argues, enhances community development and social cohesion. Communication as glue creates the bonds within a community, holding it together through the constant transmission of information, spread via radio, television or discussion. Communication as oil is like a type of “lubricant,” which helps to create and develop “social relations and cohesion.” The web can be seen as “lines of influence and interaction,” creating the ongoing and ever expanding relationships between members of the community and the relationships they will create through these forms of communication. (Emke, forthcoming)

These different “functions” of communication help to link members of the community or organizations together and are important factors in the creation of social cohesion. Within a

community different methods of communication can be used to transmit common goals and purposes that the majority believe in. Forms of communication tools that can be used to transfer these commonly held goals and values are: intra-community communication tools; traditional mainstream communication tools; and Internet technologies. Each of these, when used properly within a community, can be used to help build and enhance cohesion between organizations and throughout the community.

Intra-community communication is the process by which information is shared within a local context. This includes such aspects as who speaks to whom, the topic of conversation and what effect it has on the person. This could be accomplished through a one way means of communication, such as bulletin boards to post messages or through meeting places where people congregate or through community organizations. All of these forms of community communication create a “web” of interaction, building and enhancing community and social cohesion. (Emke, forthcoming)

Traditional mainstream communication occurs on a local scale through the use of community television, radio, newspapers or local flyers. This one-to-many form of communication has been a longstanding and highly used form of communication in many communities. While many aspects of the community may change, these technologies stay the same, providing community members with a sense of stability, while acting as a form of cohesion. (Emke, forthcoming)

The third form of communication examined is the Internet. Only recently adopted in many societies, more and more people are using it. Like the radio or television, many believe the Internet will be the next new technology that, in a few years, people will not be able to live without. Although rural volunteer groups are generally slow to adopt and use the Internet as a medium for communication, once adoption occurs, the possibilities of what rural organizations are able to do will be endless. Communicating with others both within and outside of the community will be quicker and easier. (Emke, forthcoming)

Although there are some limitations to rural organizations using the Internet, one of the greatest tasks that organizations must overcome is the learning factor of how to use the available technology and the hardware/software. A second task is learning how they can benefit from using the Internet within their organization.

### **ICT's and its Use by the Rural Voluntary Sector**

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are rapidly creating a new context for development within today's new economy. ICT is a “term used to denote a wide range of services, applications and technologies, which uses various types of equipment and software” to help connect the user to various forms of learning and information (ECOM access). These ICT services can occur through networks, the Internet, teleconferencing, e-mail, phone lines or through distance learning. The important aspect of information and communication technologies is not the actual form of technology being used, but “its enabling function to access knowledge,

information and communications: all increasingly important elements in today's economic and social interaction" and for usage within voluntary organizations communication. (ECOM access; Gurstein, 2000).

Although ICT's can be a useful aspect of community development, both socially and economically, there are several issues surrounding the implication and constant use of such technologies. Problems can range from lack of infrastructure (such as in the case of rural areas not having broadband, making their connection speed slower than those in urban areas) to issues related to a lack of hardware and software. People in rural areas have lower income levels and technology skills due to the availability of high paying jobs and lower educational attainment. Such demographics are responsible for the low number of computers and Internet users in rural areas. In addition, there are several application issues which stem from a lack of infrastructure availability and hardware. Although many programs have been created to help facilitate distance learning or on-line services or government information and programs, if the resources needed to access these programs are not available, then the underlying reason why these programs were created (to help create equality for people in rural areas) are lost.

The key is to enable rural citizens or organizations with the necessary equipment (infrastructure and hardware), and the knowledge of how to use these new information and communication technologies. This will help create inclusion for those within the community and to link information and communication technologies to the broader ideas of community economic development. This can be achieved through job creation, new business starts and the ability to strengthen social cohesion within communities.

Another key factor of ICT usage is "soft technologies" (Grace, 2001). This is the accompanying social infrastructure such as the needed skills, trust, abilities and networks of help staff and community members, all in combination with the previously mentioned hardware aspects. As volunteer groups contribute highly to social cohesion within communities, "they become an important actor when it comes to bridging the divide between those who have access to knowledge and information through new technologies and those who do not" (World Wide Volunteer, 2003).

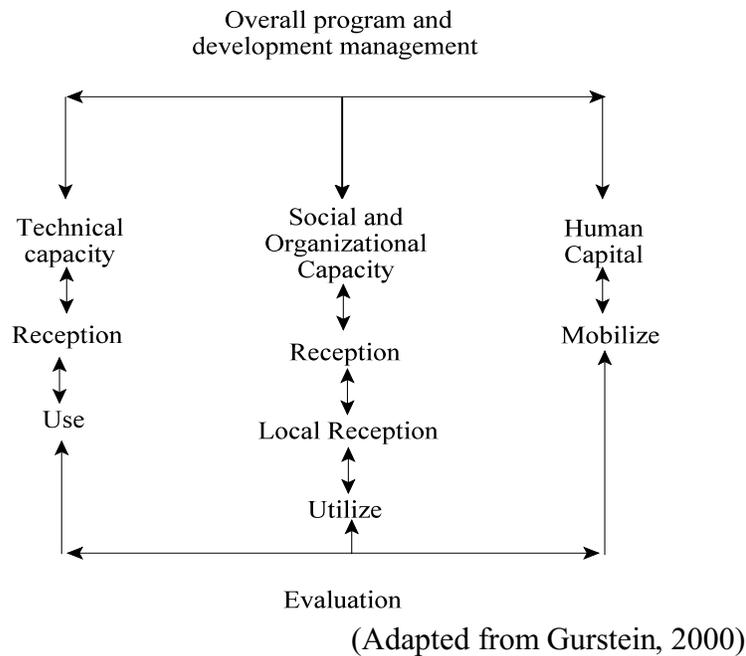
Information and communication technologies also encompass ideas of community informatics (CI). The concept behind CI links the economic and social development of the community to the technology opportunities that are available, providing the opportunity for communities and organizations to benefit from new forms of technology. Community informatics is concerned with ways of including all of those who are currently being excluded from new forms of technology, such as Internet usage. This concept is not only concerned that people have access to the hardware or software or connectivity, but also that they are provided with the means to use this new technology to help them develop the community they wish to have, both socially and economically (Gurstein, 2000).

In some rural areas today, Internet access is non-existent, so the government developed

the Community Access Program (CAP) to create a way for residents in rural areas to access the Internet. CAP was part of the government’s initiative to make Canada the most connected country in the world. These community access centres have become an intricate aspect of many communities and provide affordable access to thousands of Canadians. Ideally, CAP sites function as community learning networks, which support learning initiatives by providing the hardware for people to use and programs designed to help people build their capacity to learn how to use available software and the Internet. (Bruce, 2001; Government of Canada)

New developments in the way technologies are being distributed to the general public are being made such as CAP sites, which helps to make ICT’s available and accessible to all those who wish to use them. Community informatics are interested in “a wide range of ICT activities, particularly those that link the technology with community interests.” such as Internet access, information, education and training, just to name a few (Gurstein, 2000). Figure 1 is a model which illustrates an ideal community informatics delivery system, which includes ICT’s to people that have previously been unavailable.

**Figure 1: Community Information Delivery System**



This model includes all aspects of service and delivery that is necessary for an ideal community informatics system, which would provide the most useful technologies and service to those members and organizations within the community. The technical capacity represents such aspects as CAP sites, which provide services such as the Internet, e-mail and chat functions. Social and organizational capacity is the local capacity to identify and redistribute these

technologies to the local area. While the human capacity is the ability to coordinate and use these technologies in a way that will benefit organizations and groups that the technical capacity is designed to serve (Gurstein, 2000). This model will be used for comparison purposes when studying the information and communication technologies available within the case study of Springhill, Nova Scotia.

### **Data and Method**

Data for this paper is taken from two sources. The first is the Innovative and Voluntary Institutions in Rural and Small Town Places interviews, conducted by the New Rural Economy Project in the communities of Mackenzie, BC., Tweed, ON., Wood River, SK. and Springhill, NS. These interviews were conducted in 2003 as a followup to general interviews with voluntary sector groups in 20 sites in 1998 and 2000. Ten organizations or service groups per site were chosen by the research team. Interviews were comprised of questions which looked at the background information of the organizations or services, who and how they service their clients, members or funders, and how they use technology. It also focussed on questions related to the use of new technologies and the Internet. The data used for this paper looks only at the 28 voluntary organizations included from among 41 total interviews completed.

The second is a set of detailed interviews with 5 voluntary organizations in Springhill, NS asking more detailed information about the use of communication technologies. These five groups were chosen due to their voluntary status within the community. The organizations were Communities in Bloom 2003, Springhill Heritage Group, All Saints Hospital Auxiliary, IODE and The Rotary Club of Springhill. Each are greatly active in their local community and help to enhance and to develop the local economic and social sectors of their town.

### **Data Analysis**

Table 1 looks at how voluntary organizations use website information as a means of communication between their organization and their members, clients, funders and others who are interested in their group. Numbers show that of the 28 voluntary organizations, 8 (28.6%) use a website to communicate with their members. Numbers for this form of communication are low, showing that little information is shared through web sites for any of the various groups. Similar low numbers are also found from the organizations who use web sites to communicate with their clients, funders and others.

**Table 1: Voluntary Organizations Communication Through Web Sites**

| <b>N = 28</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|---------------|----------------|
| Members       | 28.6           |
| Clients       | 25.0           |
| Funders       | 21.4           |
| Other         | 17.9           |

Table 2 shows how organizations communicate through e-mail. 54% of organizations use e-mail when communicating with their members. This higher level of interaction between the organizations and its members creates encouragement and technical assistance throughout the group, leading to the possibility of getting more members on-line and using the Internet for communication purposes. This shows that change only occurs for those who have e-mail access. Numbers are slightly lower for communication through e-mail with clients, funders and other.

**Table 2: Voluntary Organizations Communication Through E-Mail**

| <b>N = 28</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|---------------|----------------|
| Members       | 53.6           |
| Clients       | 32.1           |
| Funders       | 32.1           |
| Other         | 35.7           |

Table 3 shows how voluntary organizations feel about the importance of adopting new technologies and how these affect the relationships they have. Organizations place relatively high importance on adopting new technologies to help them better meet the needs of the people their organizations serves, to develop new products/services, to use new equipment and to develop more expertise. Such adoption allows them to enhance what they already have to offer, while creating an overall stronger organization with better technological understanding and greater community learning.

**Table 3: Importance of Adopting New Technologies**

| <b>N = 28</b>  | <b>Percent</b> |
|--|----------------|
| To better meet the needs of the people your organizations serves | 42.3           |
| To develop new products/services                                 | 38.4           |
| To use new equipment   | 34.6           |
| To develop more expertise  | 34.6           |
| To address training needs  | 30.7           |
| To recruit new employees/staff/volunteers                        | 19.2           |
| For other reasons  | 41.7           |

Table 4 summarizes the extent to which the Internet has improved information access and relationships for voluntary organizations. 52% of organizations who participated in the survey feel that the Internet has had a more to very important part in improving their access to information. Almost as many feel it has increased access to government information. For voluntary organizations, the Internet provides a method of research that has provided more available sources, places to look for information, government information such as funding opportunities, all which many organizations would not have access to without access to the Internet. While 35% of respondents feel that there is a positive impact with people outside of their community due to Internet usage, only 17% feel that the Internet has improved their relationships with people in their community.

**Table 4: Importance of the Internet For Organizations**

| <b>N = 28</b>  | <b>Percent</b> |
|--|----------------|
| The Internet has improved access to the information we need                          | 52.2           |
| The Internet has improved our access to government information                       | 43.4           |
| The Internet has improved our relationships with people outside our community        | 34.7           |
| The Internet has had a positive impact on relationships with people in our community | 17.3           |

### **Voluntary Organizations within Springhill, NS**

The **Rotary Club of Springhill** was established in 1943 and the focus of its organization is directed towards community service and that of a greater Foreign and International organization. Its mission is to provide necessary help to those in need and the creation of programs directed to help children. The organization is responsible for such current services as providing high school and/or college bursaries, mobile health clinics, nutritional programs and

several children's programs such as summer camps, toys for tots and provision of equipment to the children's ward of the local hospital. Currently the Rotary Club has 18 core members who are active on a regular basis.

This organization feels that its current methods of communication are sufficient and work well for contacting their members. The Rotary Club uses the Internet and its members access this form of communication technology either at their local CAP site or within their homes. The organization uses e-mail and the Internet to keep in touch with other Rotary Clubs both at the local, district and International levels, which allows them to communicate quickly and locate important information. The president and the secretary are the two main people who bring information from the Internet to the larger group, although other members use it in their free time and another two members are currently in the process of learning how to use the Internet. A new project that Rotary's parent organization is launching, looks at providing all clubs with common software that is downloaded from the Internet, and available for the executive to use for rearranging the finances of their organization.

The **Springhill Heritage Group** consists of 25 core or active members. This group's focus is towards arts and culture and that of society and public benefit with a mission statement that looks at providing and making history available to others both within and outside of their community. The Heritage group is currently involved in such activities as community displays, visiting other heritage sites to broaden their current knowledge and the creation and distribution of heritage information to others.

Like other organizations, the Heritage group feels that it is very effective in its communication practices with members, but is not so effective in communicating with the overall community. They too use the Internet and while some members have home computers, many use those available at the local CAP site. All of those members who are able to use the Internet, e-mail with one another, while the president actively communicates with other organizations outside of Springhill. Those members who have Internet access bring information obtained from the Internet back to the group, sharing it with those who do not have access.

**All Saints Hospital Auxiliary** began 100 years ago and is a health related organization dedicated to improving the health of the citizens that the hospital serves. This organization has 20 active members and is currently providing funding for new equipment and services within the local hospital.

The Hospital Auxiliary, like other groups, feels that it is effective at communicating with its members, but somewhat ineffective at communicating and sharing important information with its funders. They find it difficult getting in touch with the greater community, letting them know about what their money (some of which was donated by citizens) is being used for and about the needs of the local hospital. Like other voluntary organizations in Springhill, some members of this organization use the local CAP site and many of the members have home computers. An advantage the Hospital Auxiliary has, is they are able to use hospital computers at any time, which

provides computer and Internet access to those who do not have or are unable to afford their own computer, while eliminating any wait time they may encounter at the CAP site. The Internet is very important for this organization as they use it to find competitive prices when searching to buy new equipment. This saves them time and money, allowing them to purchase things they need right away. It also allows for speedy communication with both provincial and national health services, again allowing information to be obtained and decisions to be made more quickly. As in other organizations, those who have computer access and skills are bringing information back to the larger organization, which helps to efficiently and quickly meet the goals they have set for themselves.

The **IODE** (Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire) is focussed on education and youth development. IODE has been active in Springhill for the past 92 years and its mission statement is based around citizenship, education and services. There are currently 27 active or core members. Services they provide within the community include education and information and the support of health services and projects that involve the well being of women and children, such as those which alleviate family violence.

IODE is a somewhat different organization compared to others. Their communication practices are very effective, primarily because they are active phone users. Most members are not Internet users. Many of the members are not interested in using the Internet and feel that their current means of communication works well. This organization has access to the CAP site and some members have home computers, while only a handful of members actually use the Internet. The president of this organization is an active Internet user and she continually looks for information and brings correspondence from other organizations outside of the community and their parent organization back to the group. Without such people who actively use the Internet, this group may find it more challenging when organizing events and programs. Although they encourage youth to use computers and new technologies, few of their actual members use the Internet.

The **Communities in Bloom** organization was newly formed in 2003. It has resulted in many positive changes for the overall community. Its focus is towards society and public benefit while their mission statement is to enhance civic pride, problem solve and enhance volunteerism within their community. In total there are 7 core members who contribute to the development of projects throughout the town. These projects consist of combatting littering and vandalism, implementing recycling ideas, planting flowers and helping with the development of the new community centre.

This group, although relatively new to the community has become active this past summer and feels they are very effective in their communication practices to members, funders and the general community. As an organization which uses the Internet, almost everyone within this organization has access to the CAP site, a home computer, business computer and the town's computer in the municipal offices. They e-mail to one another for quick communication, to order products for the organization and also to find out what other Communities in Bloom

organizations in Canada are taking on for projects. Overall this organizations feels that it is very organized and well informed due to their use of communication technologies.

In Springhill, voluntary organizations located within the town suffer from declining memberships, lack of funding and insufficient communication practices, like other organizations across Canada. Many of the organizations within Springhill feel that their current methods of communication are adequate, although they as an organization have yet to adopt new methods of technology and communication such as the Internet and e-mail.

### **Technology Use in Springhill**

The Internet in Springhill is used for both communication and the search for significant information that is organization specific. The Internet is accessed by volunteer members mainly through the CAP site and home computers. Information that is found by members is later brought back to members within the larger organization and to those who do not have access or choose not to use the Internet. Organizations also use such new forms of technology as e-mail to help them communicate more efficiently and quickly with other members and groups or their parent organization.

The connection with external groups outside of the Town of Springhill seems to be useful and possibly more extensive, due to Internet and the use of e-mail. The Internet has provided many organizations within Springhill the option of accessing their parent organization's web site, searching for funding or information to assist in their mandate, and conversing and seeking assistance much more quickly, than with the option of calling someone or using snail mail. In a few cases, the ability to find out what similar organizations have accomplished or to look at projects they are active in, helps to develop new ideas or aspirations for future projects that may not have developed without this contact.

Springhill's **CAP site**, like others across the province and Canada, was designed to provide access for those who may otherwise be unable to access the Internet. Although it seems that the local CAP site is constantly used, it is also important to look at its interaction with organizations within the community. Organizations were asked if they knew of any of their members who had been to the local CAP site, and all answered that on an individual basis at least two or more had been to the site either once or were still going, whether this was for technical computer training or to learn how to use the Internet. When also asked if their organization had any involvement with the CAP site, the answer from each group was no, other than the previous mention of those members who had been using it on their own.

The organizations were also asked about their awareness of the services and programs offered by their local CAP site. Answers to this question were varied, based mostly on whether or not the interviewee was a CAP site user. Those using computers at the CAP site or who visit it, including a member of the Heritage Group, the president of the IODE and a member of the Hospital Auxiliary, knew what was being offered. What is important to note is that those who are not familiar with the CAP site or who do not frequent it, are not up to date on what is being

offered or is available to them. This is something that may need to be changed, which would possibly help to further increase visitor numbers and provide Internet service to those whom the CAP site was designed to assist. Although the CAP site issued an invitation to organizations to come and use their services when the site was first opened, there have been no recent attempts by the CAP site to create involvement between its self and voluntary organizations.

Overall, the use of the Internet for these organizations from Springhill has evolved somewhat unconsciously, working its way into the activities of various organizations to a point that all but one organization, now depends on the information they find on the Internet and the ease with which communicating with others via e-mail, makes less work for them and helps to enhance the overall performance of their organization. Unlike some companies who design and strategically develop new programs or jobs around Internet usage, the organizations of Springhill seem to have unknowingly worked the Internet and its advantages into their current programs, which has again made their tasks easier. It has also helped to encourage non-Internet users to become interested in the technology while others have gone so far as to begin learning how to use a computer for the purpose of accessing the Internet.

All five organizations are using the available resources from the Internet more and more within their projects, although few groups have stopped to think how they may use the Internet for other future potential projects. Only one organization interviewed mentioned future plans that involved Internet use and a program that their executive would learn how to download and use to help organize finances. This same group also mentioned that they wished everyone in their organization had e-mail, so meeting minutes could be sent electronically and also posted on a web page. This would reduce time spent at the beginning of each meeting to review them, allowing more time for other topics. Future planning of projects that include Internet usage may be an important aspect for development and better communication for such organizations.

### **Community Information Delivery System**

An ideal community informatics delivery system was provided in Figure 1. This figure shows a model of how an informatics system should work, providing the community with the most useful technologies and services, which will greatly benefit organizations. When comparing the case study of Springhill to what an ideal system should resemble, it can be determined if Springhill is truly functioning with an effective ICT network. Of critical importance is the need to provide organizations with the technical capacity to adequately function in such a network.

The technical capacity is provided to the organizations of Springhill through the development of its local CAP site. This site allows new technologies to become accessible to the larger population and can provide the needed skills to those who are interested in learning how to use the Internet and e-mail technologies.

Social and Organizational Capacity is provided to the public through trained people who were hired to help provide and teach the necessary skills to those who are interested. Although in the case of Springhill such a capacity has been developed, its use and the promotion of skills to

others, such as the organizations, is limited to the interest individuals show. Interest on the part of the CAP site is limited and they have done little to help organizations to further develop and enhance these skills they have available at the site. A program should be developed by the CAP site to help promote available technologies in a way that would allow organizations to use these towards expanding and creating new projects which would enhance social and economic capacity within the greater community.

This is where Human Capacity is needed and the ability of either an individual or interested group to help mobilize such resources available at the CAP site and develop a way to make these useful to the organizations of Springhill. Such a program could be developed either by someone from the CAP site meeting with different organizations or through the creation of further information distributed to the organizations outlining how the CAP site could work with their organizations to develop a program tailored to their specific needs. In many cases there is already a core group within each voluntary organization who already has a home computer, so the key in this case is to determine how to expand and use these skills to further benefit their organization.

### **Where to Go From Here**

Due to changing technologies, if new methods of communication were to be adopted many organizations may have a better chance to reverse some of their current problems. New information and communication technologies provide better communication practices, which allows information to be passed on to members more quickly. It allows organizations to research and apply for on-line funding, which in many cases is the only way to learn about such options, while overall new communication practices slowly build the web that links everyone together.

There is also a disconnect between the CAP site and the organizations within the town, which results in technology resources not being used to their full capacity on the voluntary sector side. Maybe voluntary organizations need to sit down as an individual group and together design a list of things they feel would benefit them to learn or new forms of technology that they could use and apply within the work of their organization. What the community (CAP site) then needs to do, is get someone to take the time and individually look at what the needs of each group are, then organize specific sessions designed to meet the needs of the organizations. When people see this information and technology in the context of how they might use or apply it to their organization, interest in CAP site training and use is likely to become much higher.

If the volunteer groups of Springhill were able to work with the CAP site to help them look at the available technologies and determine what is available to them and how they would be able to efficiently use it within their group, together the two would be able to design an individual plan designed around each organization's specific needs. The CAP site could provide the technical assistance on an individual group basis, teaching everyone, not just one or two members. Not only does group learning promote community learning, the overlap of members between Springhill's various organizations allows members to use the skills they have acquired within the other organizations that they belong to. Using new forms of communication technology can help to

greatly boost both social and economic well being through the enhancement of social cohesion and community learning, allowing people who have acquired these new skills to use them not only in their organizations but to apply them to their jobs and everyday life.

## **Discussion**

This section discusses the link between the literature review and the case study findings of Springhill, as they relate to: volunteers groups in rural Canada, communication and its relationship with the voluntary sector and ICT's and its use in the rural voluntary sector.

### **Volunteer Groups in Springhill**

An important aspect of voluntary organizations is their learning capacity, and their ability to learn together, not just on an individual basis. Kasl also looks at the ability of the organizations to make the distinction between learning and task, an important aspect which leads to collective learning and helps both the organization and the overall community. In the case of Springhill, most of the organizations have a very low team learning capacity with regards to technology. Several individuals per organizations have the capacity to use the Internet and e-mail, and these individuals are the ones who have adopted the Internet as an important element for their organizations. Overall, no single organization has taken the time to develop their technology skills or to develop a learning plan, designed specifically for their organization and the ways in which new forms of technology could help to enhance their current services. Present methods of technology being used, such as the Internet, have been somewhat unconsciously adopted by several of these organizations, as the impact of the Internet has lead to efficient and quicker communication, more places to search for information and funding opportunities and the ability to enhance their technology and learning skills, while encouraging others in their organization to join in their learning.

When looking further at the concept of task and learning, most organizations in Springhill accomplish only the task portion. This seems to be the case due to a lack of technological skills being developed specifically for the organizations. Instead of working together as an organization, those who have the necessary skills, research and bring the information back to the group, allowing a decision to be made. Although the task was accomplished, the same individuals who were unable to use the Internet prior to the task are still unable to after the task was completed. This shows that overall group learning did not occur.

With all of the current problems voluntary organizations are facing, the government has stepped in, providing several different programs in an attempt to help alleviate such problems. Programs such as VolNet, The Canadian Volunteerism Initiative and CAP sites were created. Although none of the groups who were interviewed in Springhill mentioned that they were active in VolNet or the Canadian Volunteerism Initiative, they are lucky to have access to a local CAP site within their community, which provides Internet access and the needed hardware to several of their members.

### **Communication and Springhill's Voluntary Sector**

Communication in the sense of voluntary organizations becomes more than just the passing of information, it also includes continuous learning, social cohesion and community development. In the literature review, Emke points out the various elements of the communication process and looks at the ways in which it acts as the glue, oil and web within society. The organizations within Springhill have reliable communication methods, although they are not extremely time efficient or “up to date” in terms of technical use. The glue or the constant discussion via the phone helps to build social cohesion (oil) between members and the community. Many of the members are active in several organizations, which further helps to create the “web” or the interaction between the different organizations and the community.

Along with the elements of communication, social cohesion between organizations and the community can also be strengthened through the tools used to transfer commonly held goals and values. Three transfer methods looked at in the literature are intra-community communication tools, traditional mainstream communication tools and Internet technologies. Springhill’s voluntary organizations are very active with the intra-community communication tools, such as face-to-face discussions (or over the phone), and using traditional mainstream communication tools such as their local newspaper, who publishes notices and current events for the organizations in the town, helping them to keep the community informed. The third type of communication is Internet technologies. As previously mentioned, very few organizations have a specific plan as to how they as a group will incorporate the Internet into their activities and future plans. On an individual basis, many members use the Internet to communicate with other members, clients, funders and others who are linked to their organization. They feel it saves time and is a very efficient means of locating information and for communication.

### **ICT’s and their use in Springhill**

Information and communication technologies within the context of this research is interested in how new forms of technology can be used to access information, knowledge and forms of communication. Springhill’s organizations are beginning to learn how important the Internet is to them when accessing information that they can take back to the larger group, which helps them to make decisions or design and complete projects. Communication via new forms of technology is slowly being adopted, as individuals within these organizations are using e-mail to correspond with other members, to apply for funding opportunities that can only be found on-line or converse with their parent organization. When non-Internet users within the group see how easily these new forms of technology can be used, some have decided to learn how to use a computer, mainly so they can gain Internet access, although there are still group members who refuse to use or who are uninterested in such technologies.

As mentioned in the literature review, many residents in rural areas are limited in their technology skills due to a lack of infrastructure, hardware, software and soft technologies. In the case of Springhill, those who live within the town have the opportunity to purchase high speed Internet service, while those on the periphery are limited to dial-up. Although those with dial-up can still research and e-mail, many other communication programs fail to work efficiently without a fast Internet connection. As for available hardware and software, while some members have

computers within their home or at work, others require visiting the local CAP site to access the Internet. This provides them with the opportunity to access the Internet, while at the same time it may require they have to wait until a computer becomes available. Soft technology looks at the available technical support to provide users with necessary skills and abilities to use the new forms of technology. Looking once again at Springhill's local CAP site, there is available help provided by appointment. This means that individually, people have to take the initiative to go and use the CAP site. In some cases it may be more useful for the CAP site to create a learning session for the entire organization, based around what has been mutually identified as being a benefit to the overall group and their goals. This again relates back to how much more effective group learning is over individual learning.

The idea of the CAP site stems from a broader idea of community informatics (CI), which looks at how technology is able to be used to further develop community interests. The model adapted from Gurstein (2000) was used to analyse and determine if Springhill has an effective ICT network, which is providing for their needs. Springhill's community informatics system has reliable technical capacity in its local CAP site. Its social and organizational capacity is somewhat limited, as the CAP site personnel have provided little incentive for its local organizations to make use of the skills and programs they offer. The third aspect, which is human capacity could also be improved upon. There is a great amount of interest and current technology knowledge within Springhill's organizations, which could be easily developed and used towards the development of mobilizing available CAP site resources.

## **Conclusion**

Volunteer groups are a critical aspect of Canadian society, and are also a vital aspect of life within the town of Springhill, as these organizations help to support both the social and economic sectors of the town through their work. Like other voluntary organizations across Canada, Springhill's voluntary sector is facing several challenges, which range from declining membership numbers, a lack of funding and insufficient communication practices, all which are having an effect on the organizations ability to serve their community.

One recommendation for the voluntary organizations within Springhill is the idea of learning how to use the Internet as a group. It is important to sit down and develop a plan or an outline of why they think the Internet may be important and how they would be able to use it within their organization. Once an outline is made for the organization, they then should learn how to use the Internet, as this supports the idea of group learning, which also helps to build social cohesion and community development. It would allow them to take what they learned from the group, back into the community, and possibly use these ideas in other organizations that they belong to.

The local CAP site is designed to provide technical support or information sessions to those groups who wish to learn how to use the technology to further develop community interests. By working with the CAP site they would be able to maximize available resources, gain the technical skills they wish to receive, all for the price of their time.

Another recommendation following that above, is for the CAP site personnel or for the development of a new organization that looks specifically at developing a more advanced or better suited community informatics system. Right now Springhill has the available technical capacity to create and maintain a system that would provide organizations with the technical capacity they require. The problem with the current CI system, is that it is lacking in the social and organizational capacity and human capacity. Due to a lack of interest or initiative on the CAP site's side and no interested individual or group to help mobilize available resources from the CAP site, many of the available skills and technologies that are present are not being used. A suggestion could be for the CAP site to develop a program, which is designed around the identified needs and wants of the organizations, and provides group learning sessions to meet these needs.

Voluntary organizations play an important role within their local communities. It has also shown the difficulties that these groups face, ranging from funding issues, declining membership numbers and a lack of social support, some of which could be attributed to inadequate communication practices. Many volunteer groups in Springhill and across rural Canada are finding it difficult to give up their current methods of communication and adopt those new technologies, which many of us use everyday. Inadequate means of communication within the greater community could be the cause of some of their external problems.

Many volunteer groups find it difficult adopting these new forms of technology due to a lack of available infrastructure, hardware/software, the necessary skills being unavailable or they have an inadequate community informatics system. Whatever the case may be, there are those members who are able to use the Internet and e-mail, while many members skills still suffer, wether it's due to a lack of incentive for them to learn or that there is no available technology for them to use. The key then becomes, how to teach rural volunteer groups to want to learn how to enhance their technical skills, which in the end will not only benefit and help to emphasize their own groups ability, but will also help to create greater social cohesion throughout the community, while adding to the development of the greater community's social and economic sectors.

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