

“Civic Participation in Twillingate, NL: Identifying the Inactive as a Strategy for More Targeted Capacity Building”

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Notes for comment:

1. This is a project that Deatra began last summer and worked on in a course. We have since been plugging away at it.

1. The Target Journal is *Newfoundland Studies*

2. We are hoping to compare the Twillingate results to either or both Winterton, NL or/and the n=1995 household total for a final version of this paper.

Introduction

Over the past decade, governments at all levels have been paying more attention to the notion of capacity building and community empowerment. Initiatives such as Newfoundland and Labrador’s Strategic Social Plan, which began in 1998 (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1998), are indicative of the trend to place greater emphasis on individual and community ability to initiate and affect change on a local level. This locality or place-based perspective has often been linked to concepts such as community participation (Sharpe, 1998; Botes and van Rensburg, 2000), civic involvement (Putnam, 2000; Tolbert, Irwin, Lyson and Nucci, 2002) and collective action (Flora, 1998; Smith, Baugh Littlejohns and Thompson, 2001).

This paper focuses on the relationship between individual action and capacity building. In particular, it examines who gets involved at the local level to instigate change. Does knowing who gets involved better equip governments, developers, organizations and communities to build capacity? The paper argues that it does and that we should concentrate not only on those people who currently take action, but also (and perhaps

even more important) on those who do not get involved. This way, special attention can be paid to the inactive population to identify how they might get involved.

Communities, Capacity and Change

Smith *et al.* (2001:33), in the context of health promotion, define capacity as the “degree to which a community can develop, implement and sustain actions for strengthening community health.” They also indicate that capacity building works to identify what a community’s needs and strengths are. Similarly, Reimer (2002) defines capacity as “the ability of people to organize their assets and resources to achieve objectives they consider important.” Frank and Smith (1999) define capacity as simply “the ways and means needed to do what has to be done.” This includes skills and people, but also a wide range of physical, material, economic, and motivational elements. This characterization is similar to that of Reimer (2002) who sees capacity as being facilitated through human, social, economic and natural capital.

These definitions have several things in common: they all imply action or participation on the part of the local community in an effort to achieve something. Community capacity can therefore be seen as a process (i.e. developing and implementing actions; organizing assets and resources) needed to achieve certain outcomes or goals (i.e. community health, important objectives, economic and/or social well-being, etc.).¹ In fact, Smith *et al.* (2000) argue that capacity is the bridging mechanism to link action and change.

¹ Shortall and Shucksmith (2001) argue that sometimes, processes and goals are unclear. For example, some groups see social development as a goal in itself, while others see it as a process to achieve economic well-being. The type of goals or outcomes will impact what type of action is taken to achieve such goals.

Community capacity stems, in part, from the notion of community organization, an approach that recognizes the ability of individuals and communities to strategize and affect change (Chappell, 2001). The difficulty in this approach is that most people have become accustomed to having governments do things for them (Smith *et al.*, 2001). This is perhaps the residual effect of the top-down approach that has dominated Canadian policy-making and legislation over recent decades. Today, the predominant neo-liberal stance on government's role in running a country has placed more responsibility in the hands of the private sector, which includes the home and the market (Day and Brodsky in Chappell, 2001). Neo-liberalism, together with budget constraints, the end of the welfare state, and a trend toward devolution of powers, has further placed the responsibility of dealing with both social and economic issues in the hands of local people (Chappell, 2001). These shifts do not necessarily indicate a move in the wrong direction. In fact, it has been argued that focussing on the local better addresses issues faced by residents, and leads to finding locally relevant solutions (Botes and van Rensburg, 2000).

However, simply stating that local people must find solutions without facilitating that process can be counterproductive. This has been the case for entrepreneurship in Port Alberni, a forestry community in British Columbia. In their study of the obstacles associated with the shift communities are making toward post-fordist economies, Barnes, Hayter and Hay (1999) argue that a successful transition is dependent upon adequate institutional support, something which does not currently exist. Similarly, Smith *et al.* (2001: 37) state: “[t]he complete withdrawal of state agencies will result in no more than

a downloading of obligations without the resources or power to implement effective action.” Their health promotion work in the David Thompson Health Region in Alberta showed that community capacity building efforts are only rhetoric unless they are adequately and properly put into practice. Unfortunately, most capacity building initiatives lack theoretical foundations and a deep pre-understanding to make this possible (Smith *et al.*, 2001).

Since 2000, Human Resources Development Canada (2000) has offered a community capacity building workshop guide Online. In it, they stress the importance of working with communities to find a common understanding of what community capacity building is. As such, the workshop begins with a definition exercise. It is written that there is no single definition of community capacity building, however if “participants understand the essential nature of the term” then this definition should be used instead of trying to steer them toward other pre-established definitions (HRDC, 2000: 6). While this reflects a more inclusive approach to development and emphasizes the importance of local definitions, it still does not rectify the overarching intellectual issues surrounding capacity and its unclear conceptual nature. This could be considered dangerous because government policy at all levels is supposed to be driven or informed by academic research. If the foundations of the research are uncertain or improperly defined, or if governments interpret research incorrectly, then what does this mean for the people who are impacted by such policy? The argument here is that if capacity building is going to be used as a foundation for policy implementation and local action facilitation, it needs to be

well informed. We require a deep understanding of who, at the community level is using their capacity and in what way.

In her work on the indicators of citizen participation, Morrissey (2000) argues that past literature has already explored who is involved in participation, how often, how many people and the different mechanisms to involve people, however she provides no indication of where this work was done. Flora (1998) found that in terms of rural U.S. communities' ability to persist in times of change, communities better able to self-develop (and thus mobilize, capacity build and access resources) have more internal solidarity, were more likely to involve women, younger people and farmers in leadership positions. Reed and Selbee's (2001) research on Canada's "civic core" (those who participate most in volunteering, charitable giving and civic participation) indicates that those most likely to be civically engaged are 35 years and older, possess some form of religiosity (but are less likely to be Catholic), help informally and formally, have higher levels of education, have a higher occupational status and higher incomes. They also tend to have children between the ages of six and 17, express commitment to supporting the community, value health and life satisfaction, do not spend a lot of time watching television in comparison to most Canadians, and live in nonmetropolitan communities (Reed and Selbee, 2001:31).

These findings from the literature are somewhat related to what is expected; namely that those who are most active tend to be young, educated and employed. It is also hypothesized that women and community-born residents will also appear to be more civically engaged.

Theoretical Framework

In order to facilitate government's mandate of social and economic development through capacity building, a closer examination of the characteristics of community involvement, participation and action, starting with the individuals who take action is required. This way, it is possible to identify those who do not take action. Botes and van Rensburg (2000:51) state that: "[o]ne of the major impediments of community participation is the allegation that members of the public are not really interested in becoming involved." Related to this, Snyder argues that it is important to promote community participation because of the current problem of inaction among the populace and adds that more people talk about getting involved than actually do.

For the purposes of this paper, community involvement is defined not as regular volunteering in formal organizations, but rather the action that people take to achieve certain goals. This includes voting, protesting, campaigning, letter writing, and organizing committees and/or activities. This definition is consistent with that of civic participation that includes involvement in civic or community life (Hall, McKeown and Roberts, 2001). Formal volunteerism is also a form of community involvement; however this research sees involvement from an individual action and mobilization perspective. Do the people who take action in communities have a different set of resources (human, social or economic capital) than those who do not get involved? Will the characteristics of those involved mirror the findings of Reed and Selbee (2001)? Will knowing the characteristics of the inactive provide more focussed capacity building efforts? While

Botes and van Rensburg (2000) argue that while there is no blueprint or guide to stimulating participatory development, they do suggest, among other things, a belief in collective unity, involving a cross-section of interests, and listening to all groups in the community, particularly the less dominant ones. This requires understanding the demographic, material and role composition of the community (Botes and van Rensburg, 2000), and understanding who does and does not take action.

Data and methods

The research reported in this paper identifies who is or is not active in Twillingate, a fishing community along Newfoundland's central north coast. Twillingate is one of 32 communities under study by researchers of the New Rural Economy (NRE) project (Reimer, 2002), a five-year research and education initiative of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation.² This community was chosen for the current analysis because it represents an interesting case of how communities can survive following a major local economic shift. Following the 1992 Northern Cod Moratorium, Twillingate not only had displaced fishers; but also experienced the closing of its ground fish processing plant. The past 10 years have proven to be difficult for residents, both economically and socially (Walsh, 2002). Despite these changes, residents of Twillingate continue to survive and are attempting to diversify their economy to include shrimp processing, intensified tourism initiatives and other business ventures.

² For more information on this project, see <http://nre.concordia.ca>.

At a time when the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador is placing emphasis on capacity building in rural areas, examining Twillingate's capacity in the context of community involvement through action will be useful. This research will identify, aggregately, who takes action in Twillingate. In the summer of 2001, Twillingate residents participated in a household survey that was done nationally in 20 of the 32 NRE sites. Households were randomly generated from a household population list, a resident in each of the randomly selected household was contacted by a local caller and asked to participate. The refusal rate was 60% (97 people interviewed to 326 calls). The structured face-to-face interview took from 30 minutes to one hour to complete and covered a variety of topics including community services, access to the Internet, self-provisioning (i.e. growing vegetables, hunting, and trading with others for goods), leadership, perceptions of the community and community involvement. This research intends to first assess the level of community involvement in 10 specific areas. In the interview, respondents were asked to identify whether or not they had done any of the following in the past year: written a letter to a government official or a newspaper editor, called a radio talk show, signed a petition, attended and/or spoken out at a public meeting, given money and/or volunteered for a specific emergency action in Twillingate, posted a comment to an e-mail discussion group, or in some other way, represented their concerns publicly.

The second aspect of the analysis includes identifying who does and does not take action in two of the ten areas. The incidence of attending public meetings and writing letters to government officials will each be cross tabulated and analyzed using a chi-square, with

the following dependent variables: gender, age, employment status, education level, resident status (born in community or moved there), and involvement in community organizations (see Appendix 1 for specific questions). This paper argues that petition signing is a form of passive action. In other words, people can sign petitions anywhere and they do not have to actively seek out petitions because they are normally approached to sign or simply do so when it is available in a public place. On the other hand, attending a public meeting is a form of active involvement because people have to make a conscious decision to do so.

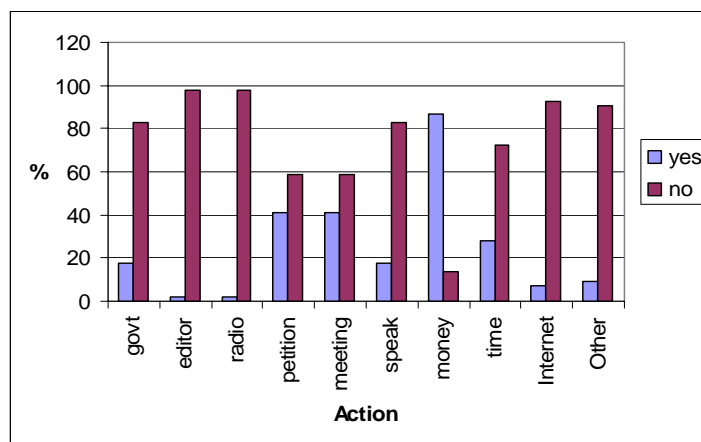
Of the 97 respondents to the survey, 70% were women, 45% were employed full-time, either seasonally or year-round and 51% were between the ages of 35 and 54. In the sample, the age range was 62 years of age, the youngest was 25 and the oldest, 87. With the exception of age, all variables are at the nominal level. Most variables required no recoding since the response categories were yes or no. However, age, employment status and education level were recoded. Age is represented in five categories: 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64, and 65 and over, while employment status is recoded to represent various stages of employment including: full-time and part-time, not currently working (this includes students); unpaid housework and retired. Education levels are recoded into three categories: less than high school, high school or higher; and a university degree or higher. A complete description of indicators listed in the questionnaire is given in Appendix 1.

Findings

Analysis of action taken in Twillingate (Figure 1) indicates that interview respondents in Twillingate are most active in donating money to emergency situations (87%), petition signing (41%) and attending public meetings (41%). Respondents reported to be much less active in calling radio talk shows or writing to newspaper editors. In fact, only 2% of respondents had done either of these activities. This could be a result of the fact that Twillingate lacks a local radio station, and is serviced by a regional, rather than community, paper.

Nearly 18% of respondents had written a letter to an elected official, or had spoken out at a public meeting. Fewer people (7%) posted a comment to an e-mail discussion group, and several people took other forms of action (9%). The lower incidence of e-mail commentary could be due to a lack of e-mail access. If fewer people have access, then it is unlikely they would have the chance or the knowledge base to use e-mail as a form of voicing their public concerns. These findings indicate that apart from donating money to various causes and emergency action, most people are not engaged in involvement at any level.

Figure 1: Types of Action Taken in Twillingate



On the specific actions of petition signing and meeting attendance, bivariate analyses with dependent variables uncover only one significant relationship. At a confidence level of 99%, the data show that members of community organizations are more likely to attend public meetings than non-members (Table 2). Table 1 shows the characteristics of respondents who sign petitions, and Table 2 shows the characteristics of those respondents who attend public meetings.

Despite the fact that other bivariate relationships are not significant, there are several interesting patterns within the sample worth noting. As can be seen in Figure 2, more female respondents signed petitions than men, and of those female respondents, twice as many had signed petitions within the past year. However, less variation is seen with the male respondents. Of the total sample, 13% of men signed a petition and 16% had not signed.

While not significant, employment status appears to impact petition signing by those engaged in full-time employment and those retired, the categories with the greatest number of respondents (Figure 3). Of the respondents working full-time, almost twice as many had signed a petition. On the other hand, retired respondents were almost twice as likely to have not signed a petition. There was only a slight difference in those working part-time, and there was no difference among those doing unpaid housework or seasonal work.

Table 1: Incidence of Petition Signing

Variable	Yes (% of total)	No (% of total)	Total	Pearson Chi- Square
Gender				2.375
Male	13	16	29	
Female	43	27	70	
			99*	
Age				8.223
25-34	6	2	8	
35-44	18	9	27	
45-54	15	10	25	
55-64	12	8	20	
65+	5	13	18	
			98*	
Employment Status (n=94)				8.444
Full-time	31	12	43	
Part-time	9	4	13	
Seasonal	1	1	2	
Unpaid housework	7	7	14	
Retired	10	16	26	
			98*	
Education Level				4.330
< high school	14	20	34	
> high school	33	20	53	
> degree	9	4	13	
			100	
Born in Community				.598
Yes	39	18	57	
No	33	10	43	
			100	
Participate in Organizations				1.580
Yes	38	24	62	
No	18	19	37	
			99*	

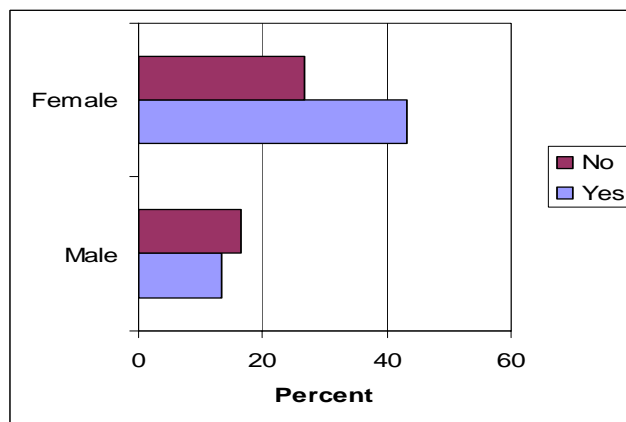
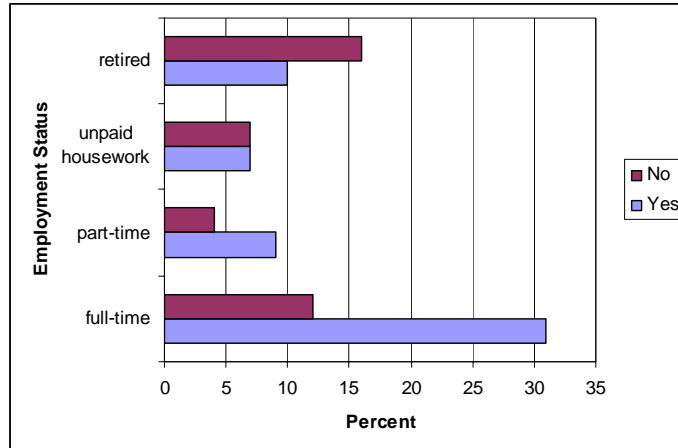
*may not add to 100% due to rounding

Table 2: Incidence of Meeting Attendance

Variable	Yes (% of total)	No (% of total)	Total	Pearson Chi- Square
Gender				.220
Male	13	16	29	
Female	28	42	70	
			99	
Age				6.432
25-34	3	5	8	
35-44	14	12	26	
45-54	11	14	25	
55-64	9	11	20	
65+	3	15	18	
			97	
Employment Status (n=94)				5.441
Full-time	22	21	43	
Part-time	6	6	12	
Seasonal	0	0	0	
Unpaid housework	5	9	13	
Retired	7	19	26	
			94	
Education Level				6.858
< high school	8	26	34	
> high school	25	28	53	
> degree	8	5	13	
			100	
Born in Community				.965
Yes	32	40	72	
No	9	19	28	
			100	
Participate in Organizations				9.498**
Yes	33	29	62	
No	8	30	38	
			100	

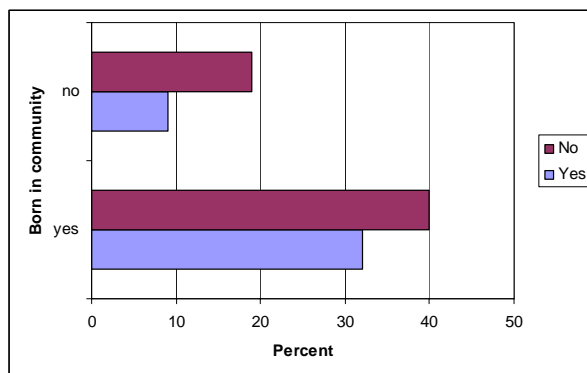
*may not add to 100% due to rounding

** p < .01

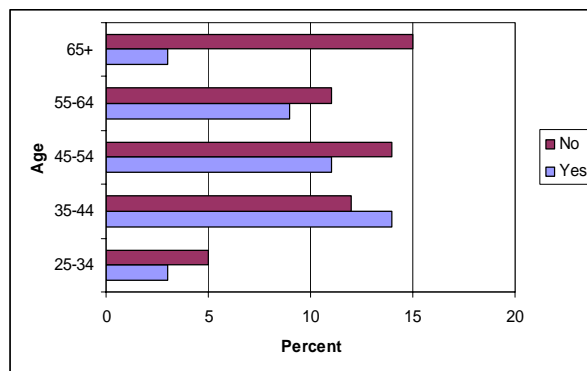
Figure 2: Gender and Petition Signing**Figure 3: Employment Status and Petition Signing**

Community born respondents participating in local organizations were three times as likely to have attended a public meeting (Figure 4). On the other hand, Slightly more native respondents had actually not attended a public meeting (40%). Of the non-native respondents, twice as many had not attended a public meeting.

Figure 4: Resident Status and Meeting Attendance



Similar to the findings in petition signing, employment status and age do not significantly affect people's propensity to attend public meetings. However, there appears to be a trend indicating that older people are less likely to do either activity. Figure 5 shows that most respondents who attended public meetings tended to be within the 35 to 64 age range, yet many respondents had also not attended a meeting. In only one category (35-44) had more people attended than not. These findings are consistent with that of Hall *et al.*, (2001). Canada's National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, indicates that the highest levels of participation are among those aged 35-64, and less among those aged 15-24 and over the age of 65.

Figure 5: Age and Meeting Attendance

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to discover the characteristics of people who take action in Twillingate. The finding that those who participate in local organizations are more likely to attend public meetings is consistent with Perkins, Brown and Taylor (1996). In their research on the elements that encourage grass roots participation, they argue that “[t]he more individuals and [neighbourhood] blocks get involved in helping their neighbours, informally or through religious and other service organizations, the more they also get involved in grassroots community action.” (Perkins *et al.*, 1996:106). While involvement in local organizations can thus be considered a predictor of meeting attendance, it is not a clear predictor of petition signing. The data showed no difference among those not involved in community organizations, and a slight difference between those involved (Table 1).

While the remainder of the data set did not result in significant relationships per se, it does show that of the people who are most active in the community (either through petition signing or meeting attendance), they appear to be younger, participate in community organizations and at least possess a high school diploma. Gender appears to affect petition signing (more women signed than did not), but not meeting attendance. Equally, resident status does not affect petition signing but does affect meeting attendance. There could be several reasons for these variations. It could be that petitions are located in public places where women in Twillingate tend to go. In terms of resident status, it is probably easier to sign a petition and support the community then go to a public meeting where exclusion tendencies might arise.

The analysis presented in this paper dealt with specific aspects of activity in Twillingate and while it has been useful to bivariately examine relationships, a key to understanding who does and does not take action in the community might lie within the sample itself. As noted previously, the sample is comprised of 70% women and 72% community-born residents. Of those who agreed to participate in an interview, 62% participate in community organizations, 45% work full-time, 27% are retired and the majority of respondents are between the ages of 35 and 54 (51%). If one was to consider response rate as an indicator of who is involved in the community, it would appear that younger women who were born in the community, participate in community organizations and work full-time either seasonally or year round are most active in Twillingate. The characteristics of the respondents could be indicative of who takes action, and

furthermore demonstrate, even before any analysis is undertaken, how the sample is biased toward certain groups.³

Conclusion

This paper argued that if capacity building is to be the approach in fostering social and economic development in the future, and if inclusiveness is a means to increase capacity (Shortall and Shucksmith, 2001; Shucksmith, 2000), then the inactive must be approached as well. One of the biggest issues with involvement is inaction (Botes and van Rensburg, 2000; Snyder, 2002). Considering the characteristics of those who appear to be active in Twillingate, one could identify older and retired people, non-community born, non-members of community organizations and those that are less educated (possess less than a high school diploma) as the less active residents in Twillingate. However, the data show that there are active people, albeit fewer, who possess these characteristics as well. Because of this, the results are largely inconclusive. If interview respondent characteristics are used as an indicator of action, then one could argue that the inactive are indeed men, non-community born, non-members and older people. However, this is simply not enough information to inform an approach to community development that uses capacity building as its core.

Future research into the characteristics of the inactive requires more conclusive evidence of those who are not involved, a larger sample of respondents and attempts to rectify sample biasness. In the case of identifying respondent characteristics in Twillingate, more

³ One must also take into consideration the fact that the local caller was female, and active in a variety of community organizations. Respondents who agreed to be interviewed might have been part of her social circle and therefore, possess similar characteristics of an active community resident.

research should be done on the characteristics of respondents in other communities that participated in the New Rural Economy Household Survey. Perhaps this would indicate that the response rate and respondent characteristics cannot be summarized into neat demographic categories, but rather are community specific. In his research on community participation and past activeness, Zekeri (1994) indicates that more comparative analysis is needed to take historical and community structural characteristics into account. While identifying the inactive along certain criteria may act as a starting point for more targeted capacity building, it also requires much more contextual information such as people's reasons for non-participation (Batson, Ahmad and Tsang, 2002), as well as the nature of the community itself (Zekeri, 1994). For example, is the community conflict ridden, is there a high proportion of income inequality among the population, and what is the general resident perception of the community's future? As such, more contextual information is required beyond simply identifying characteristics of the inactive. Future research should also explore the tendency for older and retired people to be less involved. For example, research shows that retirees are in fact one of the more active groups in community organizations (Price, 2002), yet the data presented in this paper indicates that they are among the least active on the indicators measured. Research intended to explore the inactive should inquire as to whether or not there is a difference between civic participation, grassroots organizing and volunteering among older and retired people.

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Appendix 1: New Rural Economy Household Survey (Selected Questions)
Full instrument found at ftp://132.205.151.25/research_instruments/hh10.pdf

Question number on survey	Variable name and type	Question Text	Response Categories
1	Gender and age (Independent-nominal)	First, I would like to know about yourself and your household. For each person living in this household, please provide their first name, their relationship to you, and their year of birth.	
3	Resident status (Independent-nominal)	Were you born in Twillingate?	Yes or No
8	Employment Status (Independent-nominal)	I would like to know the current employment information for each member of the household 18 years of age and over	Full time, year round Full time, seasonal Part time, year round Part time, seasonal Unemployed and seeking work Unpaid housework/child care Student Retired Other
31	Organizational participation (Independent-nominal)	Do you currently participate in any organization as a member?	Yes or No
33	Action (Dependent-nominal)	In the past 12 months, have you done any of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Written a letter to your mayor, provincial government representative, or federal government representative 2. Written a letter to the editor of a newspaper 3. Called a radio talk show about a public interest issue 4. Signed a petition 5. Attended a public meeting 6. Spoken out a public meeting 7. Given money for a specific 	Yes or No

		<p>emergency action or opportunity by a group in Twillingate</p> <p>8. Volunteered for a specific action by a group in Twillingate</p> <p>9. Posted a comment to an e-mail discussion group or to a web-based discussion group about a public interest issue</p> <p>10. In some other represented you public concerns</p>	
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