



Doing Development Differently: Innovation and Learning in the Program for the Rural Carolinas

Introduction

The Program for the Rural Carolinas is designed to help rural communities think about their own development in new ways. It starts with the assumption that economic development strategies that have had limited success in building strong and equitable economies in North and South Carolina's rural communities in the past are even less likely to succeed in today's economic and social environment. The PRC does not prescribe a standard set of strategies to achieve the program's goals. Rather, it challenges community teams to think and do differently as they work to turn locally-developed visions and plans into reality.¹

The PRC is rooted in the belief that strategy development should be informed both by analysis of local opportunities and constraints and by evidence about what has and has not worked locally and elsewhere. To this end, the program seeks to nurture existing ideas and effective methods and to stimulate new ones by exposing sites to knowledge, networks, and promising strategies undertaken elsewhere.

As PRC's managing intermediary, MDC has played a critical role in assisting communities to develop tools to analyze their existing strategies and to identify new and more powerful ways to promote economic renewal.² MDC's method is both responsive and proactive. It responds to the interests expressed and ideas surfaced by the PRC teams, helping them refine and develop their ideas into workable strategies. Proactively, it brings ideas to the teams, tests them for team interest, and helps the teams move to implement them if appropriate. In both these responsive and proactive modes, MDC has provided a rich array of learning options – from hands-on technical assistance and coaching to workshops and training to discussion groups and conference calls around particular topics and issues – to facilitate teams' analyses of what is in their communities and out in the world.

One year into the PRC, Option 1 teams have surfaced new ideas, seen new approaches, and looked at existing approaches in new ways. They have found the ideas and assistance available to them to be a critical element in this first year of planning and initial implementation. Because teams have diverse learning needs and because people learn in different ways, the varied learning venues were more or less helpful for different people at different times. The end result, however, is that team members have for the most part developed a good sense of the range of new possibilities before them, even if they are not always clear how to prioritize, sequence, or operationalize next steps.

¹ MDC's "Strengthening the Rural Carolinas: A Conceptual Framework for the Program for the Rural Carolinas," June 2002.

² Ibid, page 12

How New Ideas and Support Have Influenced PRC Start-Up

- *“Without MDC and the learning process, the team would have dissolved and used money for quick fixes that weren’t potentially sustainable.”*
- *“The technical assistance serves as a reminder that we need to be thinking outside of the box by giving us examples of how this might be done and pushing us not to just generate business as usual.”*
- *“MDC is real value-added in suggesting resources, providing connections, and guiding us to new opportunities.”*
- *“TA presents options people hadn’t heard of before...it helps light bulbs go off at different points.”*
- *“The exchange visit...was helpful, mostly in terms of showing that groups pretty much like ours have made it work. They are no smarter than we are, just coordinated and working together.”*
- *“We know what outcomes we would like to see but don’t know how to get there. Without technical assistance, we’d be spinning our wheels.”*

The translation of new ideas and possibilities into operational realities is the focus of this memorandum. Translating new ideas into action involves a host of challenges and dilemmas, not to mention the operational constraints of limited time, capacity, resources, geographic distance, and collective will. The world is full of examples of great plans that sit on office shelves, innovative ideas that get undermined during implementation by forces invested in doing business as usual, or temporary bursts of creative programming that are not sustainable. Based on what we heard in our interviews and what might be helpful to address at this point, we have selected two such challenges for discussion:

- **Combining innovation with sustainability:** how do teams innovate without starting a large number of new programs that may neither maximize the use of existing community resources nor generate long-term support for sustainability?
- **Institutionalizing continuous learning:** how do teams build learning and evaluation into implementation in a way that enables them to reflect upon and refine their strategies as part of ongoing practice?

Combining Innovation with Sustainability

Sometimes the combination of a new idea, new leadership, new political landscape, and new resources generates a program or way of approaching community change that is immediately transformative. More often, however, change is much more organic, if potentially transformative over time. Therefore, *doing development differently* does not mean starting everything from scratch, which is likely to be neither practical given limited resources nor desirable given existing community assets. The task we see the Option 1 teams struggling with is **how to build on existing assets and momentum without simply doing what has always been done with limited results; how to bring new ideas and new players to the table while drawing on relationships and activities that already work for the community (or with a little**

tweaking could work); and how to embed in existing organizations and networks new ways of thinking and working that can be sustained over time.

Creating conditions to harness existing resources. The PRC teams have begun to employ a range of strategies to bring new thinking and new ways of doing business to their counties, while building on existing assets and relationships. The following two examples are among many in the works across the seven sites.

Spotlight on Far West Mountain Economic Partners

With resources from the **Far West Mountain Economic Partners (Far West), Hinton Rural Life Center's** affordable housing repair program has modified its program in three significant ways to achieve greater scale and scope:

- 1)** It has increased its geographic reach by working with local partners to establish Housing Action Committees in each of its four target counties;
- 2)** It has added a workforce training component through developing an apprenticeship program in the construction trades; and
- 3)** It is launching a new first-time home buyer education program in each county.

In the process, it has leveraged additional grants, organizational partners, and volunteers as resources for affordable housing. Finally, it intends to collaborate with other PRC team efforts to increase resident take-up of EITC and IDA matched savings programs that can be used for housing, among other needs. Plans are underway to expand the apprenticeship program from summer to year-round and to add additional construction team supervisors in each county.

Spotlight on LO/UD-Shady Grove Program for the Rural Carolinas

Trident Technical College, through the **LO/UD-Shady Grove Program for the Rural Carolinas (LO/UD-Shady Grove PRC)**, has modified its Certified Nursing Assistant program to include new elements, such as a job readiness component, to tailor it to the needs of the community they are serving through the PRC.

The Trident Tech CNA training will be offered in conjunction with a pre-CNA training program, which will be a prereq for the CNA program. The pre-CNA program will be implemented by Adult Education in Dorchester County and will incorporate financial literacy, workplace behavior, and other job-readiness skills while also introducing the basic concepts will be taught in the CNA program. For those who do not score well enough to enroll in the pre-CNA and CNA program, the Basic Skills Lab at Adult Education will be available to help prospective students improve their test scores and position for entry into subsequent CNA trainings.

Finally, rather than conducting the training in the Charleston County area, where the college normally offers its services, it will be done at the Adult Education facility in St. George, Dorchester County. Through these modifications the LO/UD-Shady Grove PRC seeks to:

- 1)** Increase enrollment by rural residents who have not had access to such resources in the past, and
- 2)** Begin breaking down barriers that have historically existed between the Technical College and the rural communities it serves.

As these examples illustrate, communities often have a number of programs that if implemented with new partners, expanded to new populations/geographic areas, or implemented in conjunction with other strategies have the potential to generate new impacts. The innovation comes from the process of **identifying the existing asset and then creating the conditions under which the asset can be harnessed more effectively** and at a greater scale in order to achieve PRC's goals. Such an approach is to be distinguished from a situation in which support for an ongoing program does not generate significant value-added but reflects instead a lack of openness to new ways of doing business or new partnerships and ideas. Our interviews surfaced some concerns about this tension: what feels innovative to some folks may feel like business as usual to an outsider. It is only through assessing the results of these choices over time that the teams are likely to know for sure which strategies have produced the most progress toward their goals.

Leveraging existing resources. A related approach for introducing new ideas and change but attending to sustainability issues is leveraging the use of existing resources for PRC goals. A good example involves the Northwest Alliance Program for the Rural Carolinas' (**NAPRC's**) initial goal of collecting first hand information about the community economic development needs of its three counties. Early on, the team learned about a \$1 million project funded by the Economic Development Administration that involved a comprehensive economic development study (CEDS) of the larger region. NAPRC formed an informal partnership with the study consultants, helping them convene people for meetings and making sure that the consultants understood NAPRC and its goals. The benefits of the partnership are multiple in that NAPRC was able to ensure that local voices were well represented in the data collection process without having to embark on its own study, and the CEDS process created an opportunity to raise awareness about NAPRC. Finally, NAPRC was able to position itself and reserve the funds it saved by not doing the research itself for a possible longer-term strategy of hiring a staff person who could follow up on implementing some of the recommendations coming out of the CEDS process.

Another way of leveraging existing resources is to leverage visibility and awareness through partnership with well-known or high profile groups or individuals with similar missions. For example, the Marion County Collaborative Action Network (**MCCAN**) has developed partnerships with NAACP and AARP to implement MCCAN's EITC and other programs. NAACP has developed a financial literacy program through which they have conducted a study on financial literacy, but have had little contact with the people they wish to serve. A partnership with MCCAN to roll out the EITC program will give NAACP contact with potential constituents for their financial literacy program. For MCCAN, the partnership provides an excellent opportunity to heighten its visibility through NAACP's name recognition and to broaden the pool of programs to which it can direct its constituents, thus moving MCCAN toward its larger program goal of increasing wealth for those left behind by the economy in Marion County. In a similar vein, MCCAN has connected with AARP to plan and sponsor a community-wide event to stimulate interest and energy in collaborative

community economic development. Finally, both AARP and NAACP provide excellent volunteer pools for MCCAN to draw upon.

Leveraging new partners and ideas. New approaches and philosophies can sometimes be embedded into existing institutions with an end result of rejuvenating and broadening their scope and providing a vehicle for new ideas to reach people. Both are of significant benefit to the community. The PRC plays an important role here, not by doing or creating change independently, but by “planting” ideas to catalyze change among established players.

The possibilities for leveraging existing partners to implement new ideas is demonstrated through **Team VANCE’s** investment in an analysis of Vance County’s current economic realities and growth sectors, which will result in a comprehensive economic development strategy and implementation plan. The audience for the plan is not only Team Vance but also some of the county’s traditional leaders and decision-making bodies such as the Economic Development Commission. The goal is to expose these people to new ways of thinking about economic development and encourage them to add innovative practices to their current approaches.

The Beaufort County Program for the Rural Carolinas (**BCPRC**) plans to commission a thirty-year comparative study of Beaufort County and its neighbors, Pitt and Craven Counties, to demonstrate why the three counties are at such different stages of economic development and prosperity, with Beaufort experiencing the least of the three. BCPRC will use the study to “plant” new ideas with local citizens, elected officials, and other decision makers by providing a forum for discussion about economic strategies in Beaufort County and a potential platform for advocacy of alternative and more equitable approaches. The study will also serve to strengthen BCPRC's role as a player in Beaufort County community economic development.

Creating new community capacity for sustainability. Brand new programs are only as good as the capacity that exists to implement and sustain them. **While creating new organizations to implement programs is often a viable option, limited resources and existing assets might make it more feasible to initiate new programs through partnerships with established organizations.** For example, **NAPRC** is implementing a leadership development program in Alleghany County with the Ministerial Alliance, which plans to institutionalize the program as part of their ongoing work. The partnership will provide more support for and action towards PRC goals, it will enhance the capacity of an existing organization through the introduction of a viable program, and will increase the potential sustainability of the program by embedding it in a functioning organization with an interest in seeing it continue.

In Beaufort County, the **BCPRC** is facilitating the collaboration of community housing groups by encouraging two of them to submit a joint proposal for a small BCRPC grant for administrative support to implement a USDA-funded housing program for which the same two organizations have already jointly applied. One of the groups will serve as the fiscal

agent and will secure administrative support and coordination for the project while the other co-applicant will administer a credit-counseling program with hands-on support for first-time homebuyers. Another organization, although not a co-applicant, will help with outreach and recruitment of program participants in another part of the county. This collaboration, in addition to drawing and capitalizing on the comparative advantages of each of the groups, will also expand the project's geographic reach, making the program available to more people in the county. While the USDA grant has not yet been approved, the use of the BCPRC funds as a match could significantly increase the possibilities for approval.

In both of these examples, the **PRC sites are catalyzing innovation by creating, facilitating, and brokering partnerships and by strengthening the capacity of existing organizations to implement and sustain new programs.** An approach which introduces a new program as a stand-alone program, neither embedded in nor supported by an organizational structure with the capacity or intention of continuing it long term, faces much more difficult sustainability challenges.

Institutionalizing Continuous Learning

Through year one, teams for the most part have been open to learning, immersing themselves in the opportunities available to them, and developing processes for reflection and decision making about appropriate strategies. Now as they move into implementation, many teams are faced with questions that can make the transition out of learning difficult, such as: how much study / knowledge is “good enough”; what capacity is necessary to translate learning into action; and how to balance the need to show (the community, the donor, etc) you are doing something with the need to “get it right”?

“People who are serious about moving forward are going to have to step up to the plate...it's the kind of group that tends to get excited about meetings and trips but doesn't do anything with their excitement, so moving forward will be a challenge.”

Although the questions posed above could lead to inertia, they speak to a need for **continuous learning coupled with implementation.** As the teams move forward with the implementation of new ideas (or old ideas carried out in new ways), the need for ongoing learning remains constant – **the transition from learning to doing and from planning to implementation is dynamic rather than linear.** Rather than getting stuck in the space between learning and doing, a number of teams have done both by developing a range of learning vehicles to inform their implementation process.

Learning more about local context. Despite what most considered an extensive planning process, many teams still do not feel that they know what their communities need and want, particularly with regards to “people left behind.” In response, some teams are coupling their plans for implementation with plans for continued learning about the community. For example, the Randolph Program for the Rural Carolinas (**RPRC**) is collecting additional information through focus groups and community meetings throughout the county that, in

addition to providing more information about the community, will help the team learn if its proposed strategies are on target and determine what is missing and who else should be at the table. **Team VANCE** is beginning a series of focus groups with health care employers, potential employees (interested applicants), and current employees in order to translate their ideas for community level health care training into program design. Once the first round of Certified Nursing Assistant training is complete, **LO/UD-Shady Grove PRC** will conduct focus groups with the participants to find out more about them, their interests, and how LO/UD-Shady Grove PRC can best serve them.

Some teams have actually put implementation on hold, feeling that they need to collect the information and engage the community on a deeper level before they can design and implement programs that adequately respond to the needs of the people they are intended to serve. **MCCAN** is implementing a “Connecting w/ Communities” program in which members from the community are trained to use a range of communication and engagement techniques to collect pertinent information about “people left behind” in the community. This information will provide the team with the context necessary to develop programs that respond appropriately to the needs articulated in the community.

Learning through peers. Another way of learning is through peers. The **LO/UD-Shady Grove PRC** team visited the **NAPRC** team to learn about their program and implementation ideas. LO/UD-Shady Grove PRC returned home with a number of new ideas for structuring their team, including creating an Executive Committee to make important decisions quickly without having to call a full team meeting, modifying a version of NAPRC’s “Board Member Job Description,” and using the NAPRC coordinator’s contract as the basis for the contract for the LO/UD-Shady Grove PRC Administrator.

Several PRC staff coordinators have expressed an interest in additional exchanges and dialogue with each other. One noted that “networking with others thinking about and doing community development and building a community of other practitioners” was the most useful way to learn from her perspective.

Learning by doing. Sometimes the best way to learn is to jump in and do. In the case of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program, although MDC provided training and one-on-one technical assistance for the program, because the time between when the program was introduced and when it began was short, sites felt there were gaps in their knowledge, in their outreach strategies, and in the technology available to do the tax returns as efficiently as possible. Despite these constraints, five of the seven Option 1 teams took the opportunity to pilot the EITC program in their communities. Across the board teams considered it successful because it gave them an early “victory” by bringing dollars into the county through tax refunds, got the word out in the community about the PRC, and gave team members first hand experience with the constituents of their work. Perhaps most importantly, however, the on-the-ground experience of doing gave the participating teams something to build on for

next year when they will have more refined knowledge, technology, relationships, and outreach strategies.

Learning as an outcome. Learning can be one of the explicit outcomes of an activity undertaken by a team. For example, **RPRC**'s inventory / assessment activity focuses on identifying, collecting information on, and learning about the needs of Job Link clients, many of whom are dislocated workers. Specifically, with the information collected, PRC has built a database containing demographic information on these clients, as well as their education, training, and work experience. This data will be used to help the RPRC first identify gaps in Randolph County's existing training programs and jobs that would best fit peoples' interests, experience levels, and potential skill sets. A possible next step would be to work with existing partners, such as the Randolph Community College, to 1) develop and utilize assessment tools that allow people in need to self-assess their training needs in light of job trends and training programs that match the skill gaps and job trends and 2) provide support for job creation.

Learning through self-evaluation. Cornerstones of good practice are the ability and discipline to reflect systematically on whether the strategies undertaken are helping to realize progress toward intended goals and whether the goals themselves are most appropriate for the context over time. As part of the Vision-to-Action process, all of the teams collected and analyzed data to develop their program plans and articulated goals, benchmarks, and plans for self-evaluation. However, including data collection as a part of everyday project implementation and integrating self-evaluation plans into the core of the ongoing work is always challenging. Thus far, most teams have not devoted a lot of attention to the process of assessing where they are in relation to where they want to go. Some teams feel that have only just begun to implement their plans so there is little to assess. For others, goals and strategies have been modified, and new benchmarks of progress need to be

Spotlight on MCCAN
“Connecting w/ Communities”

During a two-day retreat, six county residents participated in intensive training sessions, facilitated by site coach Quinton Baker, focusing on the development of the effective listening and interviewing skills that are much needed assets in any effort to successfully communicate with individuals. Upon completion of the workshop, the trainees harnessed their new found competencies and traveled out into the community, i.e. barbeques, church meetings, card games, block parties, etc., in the effort to realize two objectives:

- 1) obtain detailed information regarding the way of life, both past and present, of individual members of 'left behind' communities, with an emphasis on gaining an understanding of the motivation *behind* their life choices, and
- 2) record and communicate findings in a fashion that provides MCCAN with the context needed to effectively address the expressed needs of the collective group.

What's being learned?

Illustrative Profile:

Black male, mid-30s, married w/ 3 kids

- Unable to obtain employment due to felony record
- Fed-up with not being able to contribute to the family income
- Spouse is becoming impatient with his failure to find work

Need: Would like for Marion County to sponsor a program that aids former inmates in their efforts to reenter the community as productive citizens

identified. Most teams are so involved, sometimes overloaded, with implementation challenges that self-evaluation simply falls to the bottom of their long to-do list. Despite these challenges, the innovative and sustainable development the PRC strives to achieve depends largely upon iterative cycles of intentional learning, planning, implementation, and evaluation. This process requires systems for measuring progress and an ongoing practice of examining that progress in relation to program goals. Without intentional reflection and evaluation, **the danger for any complex community development project is that it has little or no connection to its goals, and in some cases, may work at cross purposes with them.** Self-evaluation can also be a critical factor in helping teams determine how best to use and leverage limited resources. Thus, as an integral part of innovation and sustainability, and accountability, self-evaluation is one of the main keys to doing development differently.

Looking Forward

Learning will continue throughout the life of the PRC; however, the transition from the first to second year will certainly see an increased level of program activity as teams test their hands at implementation. As teams translate and integrate learning into these program activities, they may find it useful to reflect periodically on the following questions:

- Is the team “doing business as usual” or is it really moving towards innovation? What are some of the barriers to integrating new ideas and approaches? What strategies might help the team overcome these barriers?
- As the team’s activities begin generating initial outcomes, how will they know whether these outcomes (for example, the creation of new small businesses) are leading towards the team’s broader goals (such as increased wealth for those previously left behind by the economy in the county)?
- What supports does the team need to build self-evaluation into the way it is doing business at this point?

