

History of Community Futures in British Columbia

In 2016, Community Futures celebrated 30 years of service to entrepreneurs and communities across BC. Last year, 2017-18 Community Futures offices in BC approved 690 loans, valued at over \$36.1 M. Leveraging an additional \$26.1 M into the rural BC economy and helping to create and or maintain employment for 2,049 individuals.

Each office provides services to entrepreneurs in their communities which include business financing, business plan consultation, business planning and business start-up assistance. A [2014 Evaluation of the Community Futures Program](#)¹ found that firms assisted by Community Futures grow faster and last longer than other comparable firms.

Largely unknown outside their local regions, Community Futures groups have helped breathe new life into rural communities that have been hard hit by high unemployment and severe economic hardship.

EARLY YEARS: THE RISE OF COMMUNITY-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Created in 1985, Community Futures has its roots in previous federal government programs that emphasized long-term job creation with a particular focus on creating jobs in small, entrepreneurial settings. This marked an important shift away from earlier policies that focused on direct, short-term job creation to programs that addressed a broad range of economic challenges that faced communities as they struggled to deal with the

fundamental restructuring of Canada's resource-based economy.

Community Futures is "one of the most innovative and successful rural-oriented policies anywhere in the world."²

At the same time, federal government policy makers were moving towards the adoption of a "bottom up" approach to economic development. They recognized that local communities knew how to respond to local problems more quickly and effectively than outside agencies.

In 1983, the government created Local Employment Assistance and Development (LEAD) corporations in economically depressed regions across Canada. LEAD corporations were governed by a volunteer board of local business people with access to a variety of resources, including an investment fund, to help entrepreneurs in their communities create or expand their businesses.

GETTING IT RIGHT: THE CREATION OF THE COMMUNITY FUTURES PROGRAM

Built on the same key principles as its predecessor – local decision-making, planning and assessment, technical support, business investment – Community Futures added an increased emphasis on participation from a broad cross-section of the community representing a diverse range of interests, including social, environmental, and economic.

¹ "Evaluation of Community Futures Program." *Western Economic Diversification*. Policy and Strategic Direction Branch, 1 June 2014. Web. 16 Oct. 2015. <http://www.wed-deo.gc.ca/images/cont/18554aeng.pdf>

² Canada, Parliament Senate, Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry. 2008. *Beyond Freefall: Halting Rural Poverty*. Retrieved from <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/392/agri/rep/rep09jun08-e.pdf>

ABORIGINAL EXCLUSIVE ORGANIZATIONS

By the late 1980s, the majority of Community Futures organizations in British Columbia had been established, including three Aboriginal exclusive groups, which had been created to deal with the unique situation faced by First Nations communities.

In addition to the Central Interior First Nations group, Aboriginal exclusive Community Futures include the Nuu-chah-nulth Economic Development Corporation, one of the original LEAD corporations and Sto:lo Community Futures.

EXPANSION OF THE PROGRAM

During the 1990's, additional Community Futures groups were established to cover regions that hadn't yet been served. There are now 34 offices covering the entire province, excluding the metropolitan areas of Vancouver and Victoria.

In British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the program was transferred to Western Economic Diversification. The network of some 90 Community Futures organizations across western Canada bolstered WD's ability to actively engage rural communities in developing and diversifying their regional economies.

LEVERAGING A PROVINCIAL NETWORK

In 1992, Community Futures groups from across the province came together to form Community Futures British Columbia. The purpose of the provincial organization was to create a forum for individual Community Futures groups to bring ideas forward that could then be developed and implemented on a larger scale to benefit the province-wide network as a whole.

By working together, the 34 Community Futures groups have been able to leverage additional resources that strengthened their capacity at the

local level, enabling them to maximize their own resources and access additional funds to benefit their local communities and further enhance their local programs. It also provided them with access to a larger pool of expertise that exists within the network.

In turn, Community Futures British Columbia provided other organizations and government agencies with easy access to a well-established network of 34 community-based organizations throughout the province that were actively engaged with their communities and could help deliver programs "on the ground" at the local level.

LOOKING AHEAD: CHAMPIONS OF COMMUNITY ADJUSTMENT

Community Futures has proven to be a resilient approach to community economic development and diversification.

Over the years, Community Futures groups have demonstrated their ability to establish partnerships and leverage resources on behalf of their communities. They understand the unique challenges and opportunities their communities face, and can respond quickly to changing circumstances.

