

TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY OF HUMAN SERVICES: ASSESSING COMMUNITY SELF-DETERMINATION AND SELF-RELIANCE

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Abstract: Self-determination and self-reliance (SDR) are concepts that lie at the very core of human development and thus are pertinent to group and community development. SDR implies the ability and skill to negotiate with external environments to influence the terms of interdependence. Our challenge as evaluators has been to identify core elements that are reflective of the transition from dependency to self-reliance. A further challenge has been to develop a process of investigation that has relevance across various communities. To meet this challenge, we have identified an approach to monitoring and assessing the processes and outcomes associated with the movement of communities from dependency to self-determination and self-reliance. Also, we present a Self-Determination/Reliance (SDR) model constructed on the essential SDR dimensions of accountability, decision making, information, knowledge and skills, and resource mobilization. Critical movement along each of these dimensions indicates progress toward sustainability of community-based human services projects, programs, and initiatives.

Résumé: L'auto-détermination et l'auto-dépendance (SDR) sont des concepts au coeur du développement humain et qui sont ainsi reliés au développement de groupes et de communautés. Le concept SDR suggère l'habileté de négocier les conditions d'inter-dépendance avec les environnements externes. Notre défi, en tant qu'évaluateurs, est d'identifier les composantes de base qui reflètent la transition de la dépendance à l'auto-détermination et l'auto-dépendance et de développer un processus de recherche qui s'applique à une variété de communautés diverses. Afin de surmonter ce défi, nous avons identifié une approche de surveiller et d'évaluer les processus, ainsi que les résultats, associés avec la transition de la dépendance à l'auto-détermination et l'auto-dépendance des communautés. De plus, nous proposons un model d'auto-détermination/auto-indépendance (SDR)

établi à partir des axes essentiels SDR, c'est-à-dire la reponsabilité, le processus de prendre des décisions, l'information, les connaissances et les habiletés, ainsi que la mobilisation de ressources. Le mouvement sur chacun de ces axes indiquerait le progrès vers le développement de services, de projets, de programmes et d'initiatives au niveau de la communauté qui sont soutenables.

“We need to make the interdependence of people something that we value. Only when we start to take other people’s welfare seriously will they start to do so for us.”
(Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993, p. 309)

Since 1994 in Alberta, authority and responsibility for health care service delivery has been devolved from the province to Regional Health Authorities. Recently, Alberta communities have also been asked to assume responsibility for the organization and delivery of human services (services and supports to children, youth, and families through the Children’s Initiative). The transition from central to regional control is one we, as evaluation and research consultants, are often called upon to monitor and assess.

Our challenge has been to identify core elements that are reflective of the transition from dependency to self-reliance. A further challenge has been to develop a process of investigation that has relevance across various communities.

This article identifies an approach to monitoring and assessing the processes and outcomes associated with the movement of community groups and communities from dependency to self-determination and self-reliance. We present the Self-Determination/Reliance (SDR) model, which graphically represents the essentials necessary in movement toward sustainability¹ of community-based human services projects, programs, and initiatives.

SELF-DETERMINATION/SELF-RELIANCE

Self-determination and self-reliance (SDR) are concepts that lie at the very core of human development (Deci, 1980). Generally, as a child grows, he or she becomes increasingly self-reliant, that is, capable of coping in his or her environment without assistance from a guardian. When children reach adulthood, we usually consider them self-determining and self-reliant. They are able to sustain themselves.

Self-determination and self-reliance are not the same as self-sufficiency (Labonte, 1993). SDR does not negate a continued interdependence with external organizations, institutions, and other groups. Rather, it implies the ability and skill to negotiate with external environments to influence the terms of interdependence. SDR is having the will to accept responsibility for one's own destiny and to achieve the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes to understand, appreciate, and benefit from an on-going interdependence with one's environments.²

While SDR is an outcome, it is also a process and can be nurtured and developed throughout a lifetime (Jenkins, 1996). We assume, then, that most individuals and groups of individuals (e.g., organizations and communities) have further potential to become increasingly self-determining and more self-reliant.

SDR as a Psycho-social Phenomenon

As researchers and evaluators, our orientation to assessment has been grounded in developmental psychology and sociology. Thus, the tenets of these disciplines influence our perspectives. At times, we find ourselves somewhat uncomfortable with the foundations manifest in many of the empowerment approaches to community development and capacity building, foundations that emphasize a power struggle within a political context.

We do not deny that self-reliance, self-determination, and self-direction have been established as psycho-social constructs of empowerment. They have even been promoted at the level of the World Health Organization as essentials of primary health care (WHO, 1979). However, we work with many individuals, organizations, and communities that would not be classified as "oppressed" or in need of empowerment. Therefore, to minimize the influence of predispositions³ that may tend to focus on power and control, we have tended toward understanding individuals, organizations, and communities from a perspective of human psychological and social development. A psycho-social development emphasis recognizes that multiple environments form the context within which individuals and groups grow and function as individuals and members of a community. While we recognize the tremendous influence political context can have on community, we do not concentrate on the political reality to the exclusion of other environmental realities.

Various measurement scales have been developed to assess the degree of SDR individuals may have—sometimes expressed as capacity (Green-Demers, Pelletier, & Menard, 1997; Harrison, 1994; Kraimer, Seibert, & Liden, 1999; Sheldon, 1995). Little if any work has been devoted to the operationalization and measurement of these constructs at the collective level. However, some effort has gone into constructing models and measures of “community participation,” which is a construct that shares some of the elements we consider essential for SDR development (Bjaras, Haglund, & Rifkin, 1991).

Therefore, we have identified self-determination and self-reliance as constructs that pretty much define an individual, group, or organization’s ability to interact with various external environments in order to take advantage of opportunities and/or to satisfy needs. We recognize the development of SDR as a natural progression toward maturity and self-actualization,⁴ whether maturity is on the part of an individual or a collective.

SDR in Individuals

Numerous examples are available illustrating the development of self-reliance⁵ in all age groups and in a variety of environments. One will find evidence that self-determination/self-reliance can be successfully achieved and/or improved throughout life (Owens, Mortimer, & Finch, 1996), including situations where significant barriers to self-determination are encountered — situations such as adults with severe disabilities (Bambara, Cole, & Koger, 1998), poorly motivated students (Garner, 1998), and elderly persons (Beckingham & Watt, 1995).

SDR in Organizations

SDR development has been particularly beneficial in corporate settings. Since the early 1960s, companies have experienced increases in productivity, quality, and profit through successfully implementing self-directed work teams.⁶ Currently, companies such as Federal Express, Tektronix, General Electric, Xerox, Volvo Kalmar, and Northern Telecom continue to promote self-reliance among employees (Cleland, 1996; Fisher, 1993; Manz & Sims, 1993; Osborne, Moran, Musselwhite, & Zenger, 1990). Success observed in business has motivated many areas of the public sector to employ similar self-directed work team strategies. Improving SDR through self-di-

rected work teams has been successful outside business settings, such as in health (Becker-Reems & Garrett, 1998), academia (MacDonald, 1995), space exploration (NASA, 1999), and public schools (SDWT, 1999).

SDR in Communities

SDR in a community is not unlike self-determination and self-reliance in individuals and organizations. Communities, as a group of individuals sharing some common interest, can develop increased ability to define and direct their own destiny. We find a great deal of this discussion in the “community capacity” literature.⁷ Much of the predisposition surrounding community capacity centres on communities having the wherewithal to be accountable for an assigned mandate — that is, having the necessary infrastructures, resources, skills, and supports (Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector, 1998). Various approaches and models have been developed to better understand how communities develop capacity. For example, Goodman et al. (1998) outlines 10 dimensions of capacity within two essential elements, participation and leadership. This might be termed a community readiness approach. Similarly, community assets and capacity might be approached as a process of mapping building blocks of opportunity (Mcknight & Kretzmann, 1997). Others prefer a more proactive approach, such as empowerment through action research (Flynn, Ray, & Rider, 1994; Minkler & Wallerstein, 1997), and empowerment through evaluation⁸ (Fetterman, 1996). A number of action research approaches are grounded in presuppositional stances of power/politics, such as those of Freire (1973). Action research in community development is essentially about citizen empowerment. It emphasizes citizen participation, information and problem solving, and sharing of power—increases in equity and improvements in social justice (Flynn, Ray, & Rider, 1994).

SDR GROWTH MODEL

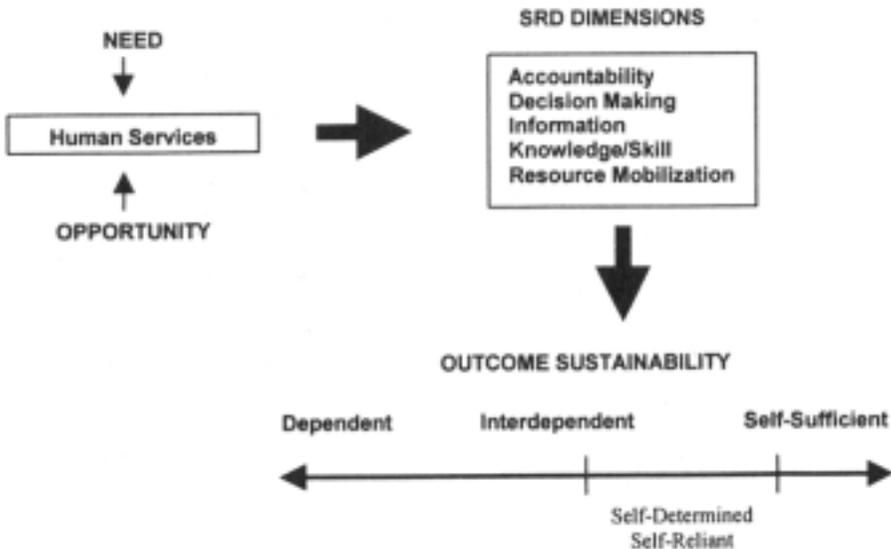
In our experience, we have found it useful to initially take a phenomenological approach to understanding phenomena (Howard, 1996). This approach leads us to identify the essentials of a construct. The essentials are those elements necessary to make some “thing” what it is. Having identified a series of elements that make up a thing, we then reduce the collection of elements until we are

left with those elements that must be present for that thing to be recognized. More importantly, we derive these essential elements from experience, emphasizing the lived relationship of body-subject to its situation (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Through our review of the literature and our experience with organizational and community development, we have come to understand that the essence of self-determination/self-reliance lies in five dimensions: accountability, decision-making authority, information gathering and sharing, knowledge and skills, and resource mobilization. Figure 1 is a model to illustrate our understanding of the core interaction of elements that lead to increased SDR and outcome sustainability.

Developing SDR, as presented in the SDR Growth Model, is the development of an understanding within the community that enables and facilitates the community to take responsibility for action (e.g., health promotion). Infrastructures that support self-reliance are structures that promote community accountability, efficient and ef-

Figure 1
SDR Growth Model



fective decision-making mechanisms, pathways to sufficient resources (capital and personnel) to plan and carry out activities, knowledge and skill acquisition, and mechanisms for gathering and sharing appropriate and accurate information. While these are things that people from the outside may at first glance be eager to provide, the infrastructure is usually already available; it just has not been “given over” to support a particular initiative.

Opportunity and Need

We believe that a community’s desire to define its own destiny and become more self-reliant will be driven by either opportunity or need. The community will either be presented an opportunity (e.g., government funding available to promote a certain agenda) or identify a need that requires attention (e.g., increased incidence of crime). We suspect that growth in SDR is stimulated more by need than opportunity, since often opportunity presents itself in the form of grant money. In some of these instances, we have observed a solution looking for a problem. However, we have not attempted to confirm this suspicion.

Accountability/Responsibility

When individuals and communities assume responsibility for themselves and others, they experience a sense of accountability for their actions. SDR at the individual and community level seems to become a real thing when there is a belief in and commitment to making a difference. SDR is the understanding and willingness to accept where the “buck starts and stops.” A sense of accountability is the motivation that encourages individuals and groups to know what is going on around them and to take an active role in what happens to them.

Decision-making Authority

SDR is proactively determining one’s own destiny. An essential element, then, of SDR is the authority to make decisions. Just as for an individual, an organization or a community must see itself as a decision maker. Decision making is recognizing that options are available and then exercising the will to make a choice.

Gathering and Sharing Information

While information may be considered a resource, its importance is so critical to SDR that it deserves specific attention. Individuals and groups must have relevant information available to them in order to make informed decisions. Issues of trust and mistrust arise out of lack of information or the perceived lack of sharing important information. A critical threat to self-reliance is the “mushroom syndrome” — fed manure and kept in the dark.

Knowledge and Skills

Information alone is not sufficient in the development of SDR. Projects, programs, and initiatives must have core competencies to carry out activities. In human services, technical knowledge and skill are often not enough. Those responsible for success must have certain social and emotional abilities to handle the demands of change and ambiguous contexts.

Resource Mobilization

Activities consume resources such as time and money. Resource mobilization is determined by three factors — availability of resources, access to resources, and administration of resources. Resource considerations range from mobilizing financial support to recruiting and supporting human resources. Community facilitators are often surprised at the extent of resources existing within their communities (as are community members themselves). While in many instances resource issues centre around money, without ability to organize, lead, manage, and delegate human resources, financial resources may be of secondary importance.

Outcome Sustainability

SDR is important to the sustainability of community-based human services. From our point of view, sustainability is maintaining long-term outcomes that are worth maintaining. Determining “worth,” however, requires some attention to measuring costs (resource commitments of time, space, and money) and either effectiveness or benefits.⁹ Maintaining long-term outcomes is more likely when the value of those outcomes is shared in the broader social, political, and economic context within which a service system rests. Sharing of value is more likely when the service system recognizes and fosters its

interdependence with the environment. SDR is the recognition and development of interdependent relationships that profit both the service and the environment in which the service is maintained.

While total self-sufficiency is likely unachievable for most individuals, organizations, or communities, self-determination and self-reliance remain critical for sustainability. Movement toward self-sufficiency along each of the five dimensions must reach a certain *critical position*¹⁰ before SDR contributes to sustainability.

ASSESSING COMMUNITY SDR

Assessing self-determination and self-reliance is particularly salient in understanding contemporary culture (Peterson et al., 1993). SDR is a psycho-social phenomenon and a prominent theme in the development of individuals, work groups, and communities. Contemporary culture encourages independent thought and recognizes the value in “assertive voice.”

Evaluating and understanding community SDR from this perspective requires that questions address the manifestation of SDR in the dimensions outlined in our SDR growth model:

- To whom are communities responsible and accountable? Are they prepared to take on this responsibility? What indicators reveal growth in accountability?
- To what extent do community members choose to be involved in decisions that affect them? What indicators reveal growth in decision making?
- Do communities have the information they need? Do they seek what they don't have? Do those community members with information share what they know with others? What indicators reveal growth in information gathering and sharing?
- Do communities have the necessary knowledge and skill to act on information and accommodate change? What indicators reveal growth in knowledge and skills?
- To what extent do communities mobilize resources to do what they want to do? What indicators reveal growth in resource mobilization?

These questions inform us of a community's desire to be more self-determined and self-reliant and indicate movement toward increased SDR.

Looking with the Community

One of our presuppositions in understanding community SDR is that: in many instances capacity to be self-determined and self-reliant are *a priori*, that is, to some degree they already exist within. Therefore, in determining the extent to which a community is exercising SDR, we have found it more appropriate to “look with” the community rather than “look at” the community.

Looking with a community is allowing the community to “reveal” itself. Allowing the community to reveal itself to evaluators, facilitators, social marketing promoters, and/or community capacity builders involves patience. It also requires a good deal of listening and observation.

Working with a community is most often working with a community organization or community working group assigned responsibility for community development or the implementation of an initiative or program to enhance community development. When we refer to assessing the SDR of the community, we are most often referring to a “work group” that represents community interests.

Initially, assessing growth in SDR is watching for and determining the extent to which behaviours manifest themselves that indicate a movement from less to more SDR. With tact,¹¹ we share our observations with the community. Secondly, we engage the community in reflective sessions that assist community representatives in determining where they see themselves along each of the SDR dimensions.

Sample Indicators of SDR

In the following set of sample indicators, we make reference to community. For the most part, we are referring to a majority of community members.

Accountability/Responsibility

- Community acknowledges its role in creating particular circumstances (i. e., reduced tendency to lay blame on others or external factors).
- Community can articulate community values.
- Community is committed to a common vision.

- Community goals and objectives are clearly articulated.
- Success is determined by reflection of outcomes and impacts on goals and objectives.
- Community members commit time to a process even when other priorities beckon.
- Decisions/actions reaffirm the vision.

Decision-making Authority

- Roles and responsibilities of various groups are clearly articulated.
- Decision-making processes are clearly defined.
- Actions taken at community level are directed by decisions made at community level.
- Constituents are adequately and fairly represented.
- Community values guide decisions and actions.
- Community policy guides and informs decision making.

Information Gathering and Sharing

- Community is aware of issues and actions.
- Community shares a common understanding of issues and actions.
- Gaps in information are identified.
- Diverse sources of information are sought.
- Information is gathered from all groups in the community, including vulnerable groups (e.g., workshops and information sessions are provided on vulnerable/ethnocultural groups in the community, guest speakers, tours, visitations).
- Information is actively disseminated to all community members.
- Community has convenient access to information that is presented in formats useful and relevant to users.

Knowledge and Skills

- Tolerance for diverse perspectives.
- Reflection on one's own perspectives in light of other's perspectives and experiences (ability to learn).
- Tolerance for ambiguity and change.
- Capable of synthesizing diverse information.
- Capable of identifying gaps in knowledge and skills.

- Ability to listen through people's experiences to identify issues from community input.
- Knowledge of community context (multiple environments).
- Ability to articulate ideas and perspectives.

Resource Mobilization

- Resources are considered beyond those that are strictly financial (e.g., in-kind, human).
- Resource requirements are articulated.
- Community assesses the availability of local resources.
- Community assesses the availability of resources outside the local domain.
- Identified needs are met.
- Community establishes a broad network of contacts that can serve as connectors to resources.
- Community is able to articulate a resource mobilization plan.

CONCLUSION

The SDR Model identifies the key elements we believe determine the extent to which a community has the will to determine its own destiny. They are:

1. Commitment to and a sense of responsibility for others in the community;
2. Authority to make critical decisions;
3. Information that is relevant and timely to make appropriate decisions;
4. Knowledge and skill to reflect on and respond to information and decisions made; and
5. Resources available to community members (whether they exist in the community or the community receives them from outside).

Through an increased sense of SDR, communities move forward with confidence and a sense that they can survive without extensive external support, while continuing to acknowledge that they exist within an interrelationship with their external environment. Most importantly, communities willingly and actively engage in an interrelationship with their external environments to fulfil their needs and exploit opportunities. This engagement is a movement toward sustainability.

What remains, however, is the validation of our assumptions, dimensions, and indicators through prioritization of indicators and development of measurement scales for each dimension of SDR along a continuum of outcome sustainability.

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NOTES

1. Sustainability is the maintenance of long-term outcomes.
2. Environments are many (natural, social, political, economical, etc.).
3. As a human activity, all research and evaluation is grounded in various presuppositions that influence the questions we ask and the answers we accept.
4. Maslow (1968) identified various levels of actualization as levels of need satisfaction. Groups (organizations and communities) can be viewed in a similar light, in that a collective (such as a business) will satisfy survival needs before it endeavours to fully satisfy higher order needs such as mission and vision.
5. A great deal of the literature makes reference to self-determination.
6. One can find references to the merits of individual self-reliance as well in literature directed at self-leadership (Sims & Manz, 1996). More importantly, possibly, is the evidence that supports the development of self-reliance/determination as beneficial in reducing “group think” and improving the quality of group decision making (Kroon, Hart, & van Kreveld, 1996).
7. While one might expect most of the literature on community capacity to reside in community development, a large body of literature on the topic can be found in the areas of health development, health policy, and health promotion.
8. A critical appraisal of empowerment evaluation can be found in Worthington (1999).

9. An excellent treatment of cost-effectiveness analysis can be found in Yates (1998).
10. At this time, critical position has not been measured or validated.
11. Communities are not likely to be responsive to being told that they are more or less self-reliant. Many of our discussions begin with "We have noticed that the group is ...".

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