

# Healthy and Sustainable Rural Communities

## Introduction

This backgrounder has been prepared for the Rural Policy Forum, co-sponsored by the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre at Dalhousie University and the Coastal Communities Network of Nova Scotia. This forum is a part of the Rural Communities Impacting Policy Project (RCIP), a research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council through its Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) Program. The goal of the RCIP Project is, “to increase the ability of rural communities and organizations in Nova Scotia to access and use social science research in order to influence and develop policy that contributes to the health and sustainability of rural communities.” What do we mean by “healthy and sustainable” rural communities? This backgrounder will answer the question as simply as possible.

## What is a healthy community?

The RCIP Project uses this definition of a healthy community<sup>1</sup>:

**A “healthy community” is one where people, organizations and local institutions work together to improve the social, economic and environmental conditions that make people healthy - the determinants of health.**

The idea of a healthy community is based on a broad definition of “health.” The World Health Organization defines health as, “a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Health is a resource for everyday life, not the object of living. It is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources as well as physical capabilities.”<sup>2</sup>

This deceptively simple story speaks to the complex set of factors or conditions that determine the level of health of every Canadian.<sup>3</sup>

"Why is Jason in the hospital?

Because he has a bad infection in his leg.

But why does he have an infection?

Because he has a cut on his leg and it got infected.

But why does he have a cut on his leg?

Because he was playing in the junk yard next to his apartment building and there was some sharp, jagged steel there that he fell on.

But why was he playing in a junk yard?

Because his neighbourhood is kind of run down. A lot of kids play there and there is no one to supervise them.

But why does he live in that neighbourhood?

Because his parents can't afford a nicer place to live.

But why can't his parents afford a nicer place to live?

Because his Dad is unemployed and his Mom is sick.

But why is his Dad unemployed?

Because he doesn't have much education and he can't find a job.

But why ...?"

Over the past twenty years, research has revealed that there are conditions that affect the health of people – the determinants of health. These are<sup>4</sup>:

- Income and Social Status
- Social Support Networks
- Education and Literacy
- Employment/Working Conditions
- Social Environments
- Physical Environments
- Personal Health Practices and Coping Skills
- Healthy Child Development
- Biology and Genetic Endowment
- Health Services
- Gender
- Culture

Healthy communities have emerged in Canada over the last 15 years as part of a world-wide movement. One definition of a “healthy community” is:

- clean and safe physical environment
- peace, equity and social justice
- adequate access to food, water, shelter, income, safety, work and recreation for all
- adequate access to health care services
- opportunities for learning and skill development
- strong, mutually supportive relationships and networks
- workplaces that are supportive of individual and family well-being
- wide participation of residents in decision-making
- strong local cultural and spiritual heritage
- diverse and vital economy
- protection of the natural environment
- responsible use of resources to ensure long term sustainability<sup>5</sup>

### **What is a Sustainable Community?**

The RCIP Project uses the definition of a sustainable community from the Sustainable Communities Network<sup>6</sup>:

**“Sustainable communities are more environmentally sound, economically prosperous, and socially equitable.”**

The idea of sustainability arises from the environmental movement and was embraced by the United Nations at the World Conference on Sustainable Development, the “Earth Summit” in Rio (1992), and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2003). Sustainable development has come to mean, “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>7</sup>

The concepts of health and sustainable development have been linked together:

“Fundamental to the concept of sustainable development is that it rests on three pillars – the social dimension, the economic dimension and the environmental dimension. For development to be sustainable, all three dimensions need to be addressed in a balanced and integrated way, with due regard given to meeting both present as well as future needs. The environmental, social and economic dimensions should thus be seen as mutually enforcing, interdependent entities of sustainability. In this context, health provides an important unifying theme in relation to the three pillars of sustainable development.”<sup>8</sup>

Closer to home, the Government of Nova Scotia has developed a Sustainable Communities Initiative, which is:

“... about supporting communities through a collaborative approach which integrates social, cultural, economic and environmental policies and programs. It's about governments at all levels working together - and with the communities they serve - toward decision-making that meets the needs of today without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Healthy and Sustainable Rural Communities**

We will apply these concepts and definitions to our work on promoting healthy and sustainable rural communities in Nova Scotia.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Shookner, taken from RCIP Presentation to ACOA Partners Forum, March 2005

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. (2004) Glossary of terms. On-line:  
<http://www.who.int/health-systems-performance/docs/glossary.htm#health>

<sup>3</sup> Health Canada (2003) What Makes Canadians Healthy or Unhealthy? On-line:  
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/phdd/determinants/index.html#determinants>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition. (2004) What Makes a Community Healthy? On-line:  
[http://www.healthycommunities.on.ca/about\\_us/healthy\\_community.htm](http://www.healthycommunities.on.ca/about_us/healthy_community.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Sustainable Communities Network. (2002) About Sustainable Communities. On-line:  
<http://www.sustainable.org/information/aboutsuscom.html>

<sup>7</sup> UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development. (2003). On-line:  
<http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/index.htm>

<sup>8</sup> von Schirnding, Y. and Mulholland, C. (2001) Health in the Context of Sustainable Development: Background Document prepared for WHO Meeting: "Making Health Central to Sustainable Development: Planning the Health Agenda for the World Summit on Sustainable Development" Oslo, Norway. On-line:  
[http://www.who.int/mediacentre/events/HSD\\_Plaq\\_02.6\\_def1.pdf](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/events/HSD_Plaq_02.6_def1.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Nova Scotia Sustainable Communities Initiative. On-line: <http://www.nsaccess.ns.ca/sci/>