VOLUNTEER WORK, INFORMAL LEARNING, AND THE QUEST FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES IN CANADA[1]

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Abstract

Drawing on a study on informal learning and volunteer work that was part of the Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) network, this paper presents findings from four Canadian settings where volunteers have acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to community sustainability. Most of the learning was informal and included three spheres of sustainability (social, ecological, and economic). Making these informal learning outcomes explicit can benefit individual volunteers and increase the sustainability of our communities.

Résumé

S'appuyant sur une étude traitant de l'apprentissage informel et du bénévolat, tirée du réseau Work and Lifelong Learning *(WALL), cet article présente les résultats de la recherche dans quatre emplacements canadiens où les bénévoles ont acquis les connaissances, les compétences et les attitudes liées au développement communautaire. La majeure partie des apprentissages se sont faits de façon informelle, et touchaient au développement durable sur le plan économique, social et écologique. Le fait de rendre ces résultats explicites peut être avantageux pour les bénévoles et améliorer la vitalité de nos communautés.*

Introduction

From undue corporate control to global climate change, and from an uninvolved citizenry to a perceived lack of alternatives, the sustainability of many of Canada's communities is under siege. In this article, we explore how citizens from different communities are learning to increase the health of their communities through volunteering in a variety of settings. What is particularly interesting about this learning is that it results from an activity (volunteering) that is not generally thought of as a site of learning. This paper is based on data collected through focus groups and semi-structured interviews in four Canadian communities of practice that involve a great deal of volunteer work. What brings together the four studies is the exploration of learning processes and outcomes that nurture community sustainability. Due to the different nature of the volunteer work (from

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promoting alternative agriculture practices to implementing democratic self-governance) as well as the type of volunteer participation (from episodic to regular), it was not possible to develop a single instrument for data collection. In all cases, significant acquisition of skills, knowledge, and attitudes related to sustainability took place. Although not all volunteers used the term "sustainability" in their discourses, it was clear that the learning derived from their volunteer work has improved their abilities to contribute to strengthening their communities' sustainability.

Conceptual Framework

Our framework was informed by four related concepts: sustainability, social movement learning, informal learning, and volunteer work. Although the concept of sustainability has a long history among indigenous peoples (the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee considered the impact of their decisions on the next seven generations), its resurgence, at least in the West, is relatively recent. We trace its reemergence to the concept of sustainable development, which became popular in the West when, two decades ago, the Brundtland Report conceptualized it as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Later, this focus on the longevity of ecosystems evolved to a broader conceptualization that evokes images of a better world based on ecological, economic, and social justice, and appeals to creating new ways to live and prosper while ensuring an equitable, healthy, and democratic future for all people and the planet (Holtz & Brooks, 2003; Clover, 2006; Sumner, 2005; Viezzer, 2006). While the focus of this paper is the broader concept of sustainability—since we are concerned with the sustainability and health of communities—we draw on the significant literature related to sustainable development.[2] Like others working in the area of sustainability, we are informed by the operationalizing nature of sustainable development, which emphasizes specific processes of nurturing healthier communities and a more sustainable planet.

This has not been the prevailing view on development during the 20th century, and even today most development practices do not follow sustainability principles. Development is often thought of as something humans enact on the environment, and understandings of development as growth have been normalized. Despite repeated warnings that ecological systems cannot handle unchecked growth, society's voracious appetite for just about everything disturbs the human/environment relationship to the extent that we are now in an ecological race to the bottom (Brecher, Costello, & Smith, 2000; Johansson & Goldemberg, 2002; Jucker, 2004; Serrano, 2000). At this historical juncture, awareness is rising about the necessity to move away from a mentality of development as growth to one that understands sustainability in terms of the complex relationships between ecological, social, and economic dynamics.

In spite of the immediacy of these concerns, the concept of sustainability has witnessed much criticism and debate over the years. A frequent critique is that this concept is unclear, leading many to interpret "vagueness as meaninglessness" (Daly, 1996; also see

2 While most sustainable development literature focuses on development in the Global South, we find that the issues of social justice and ecological care taken up by this literature to be salient for our work and research in Canadian communities.

Dresner, 2002). This critique argues that the concept of sustainability has been stretched wide and thin and used by different groups with diverging missions and practices, from grassroots community settings to multinational corporations.[3] Another critique is that sustainability has mostly been conceptualized as integrating ecological considerations with economic policy, leaving out any social impacts caused by development. A third criticism, raised by some environmental groups, is that sustainability is an oxymoron because sustainable and development are contradictory terms. For these groups, development is seen as synonymous with economic growth and wealth creation, whereas sustainability is seen as being mindful of ecological destruction. Along these lines, Dresner (2002) notes that the deeper philosophical question is whether the response should be to try to achieve wealth in a more ecologically sustainable manner, or to abandon the pursuit of wealth itself (p. 73).[4]

Mainstream development has generally been measured by the economic bottom line with efforts directed towards increasing profit and growth. Only in the last couple of decades has there been a conscious effort to consider the consequences of that development, paying special attention to externalities that were previously ignored and to the need to shift from a vision of development that focuses on economic dynamics of quantitative expansion (growth) to one that emphasizes the qualitative improvement of the lifeworld (sustainability). However, as the ideas of sustainability become increasingly mainstream, the concept is often devoid of meaning. Thus, following Johnston, Gismondi, and Goodman (2006), we suggest that the Brundtland Report provides an adequate approach to sustainability as long as we also consider the extent to which particular initiatives support the agenda of corporate globalization or promote alternatives to it. That is, the sustainability that we explored with volunteers in different sites across Canada is one in which concern for the needs of future generations was to a certain extent expressed in a counterhegemonic manner in a way that recognized that the current neo-liberal model of globalization results in ecological, social, and economic injustice. Such conceptions of sustainability often include three main dimensions: economic, ecological, and social. These three subsystems—or overlapping spheres—are complementary in the sense that the sustainability of each one largely depends on the long-term health of the other two (Boyd, 2004; Daly, 1996; Morrison, 2005).[5]

In the context of our study, the social sphere refers to the relational aspects of a community, including culture (e.g., the ways in which genders interact) and governance (e.g., the ways in which decisions are made). The ecological sphere refers to the environment (local and global) in which a community is rooted. The economic sphere considers the financial aspects of a community. To achieve community sustainability, each sphere needs to be in balance and sustainable in its own right. We will use these three overlapping spheres

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3 An example from one of our case studies highlights this vagueness: both the corporation Monsanto (which produces many of the chemical inputs of industrial agriculture) and small-scale farmers (who practise organic agriculture) claim to practise sustainable agriculture.

4 For more information on the debates between economists and environmentalists on the issue of sustainability, see Selby (2006), Meadowcraft (1997), and Parris and Kates (2003).

5 The tripartite division of sustainability into social, economic, and ecological components is a common taxonomy. One can certainly make the argument that there are only two overlapping spheres of sustainability: ecological and social. In such a model, the economic—a human or social construct—is subsumed by the social sphere. However, given the very real concerns for financial sustainability of many of the research participants, particularly related to their organizations, it makes sense to include the economic sphere.

as a map to guide us through the volunteers' different learning about sustainability.[6] As we will outline in the remainder of this conceptual framework, we approach this from an adult education perspective, recognizing that there are many others—such as environmental adult education, public health, and other interdisciplinary or multi-sectoral civil society groups—that are also involved in efforts to understand and promote sustainability at a community level.

The second concept informing our framework is social movement learning. This term was first used by Paulston (1980) in relation to Scandinavian folk colleges, and it has been revived recently in Canadian adult education circles (Hall, 2006; Hall & Clover, 2005). Social movement learning has an external dimension (learning by society at large of issues raised by social movements) and an internal one (learning by members of a movement). In this study we focused on the latter. The literature on social movement learning is still scarce, and more abstract and theoretical than based in lived experience. This is a significant gap in our field because it has been repeatedly argued for almost a century (e.g., Finger, 1989; Lindeman, 1926; Robinson & Shellcross, 1998) that the learning that takes place in social action and community initiatives is often more effective and relevant than the learning that occurs in schools. The paucity of literature based in lived experience of social movements may be explained by three reasons: a) social movements have a focus on action rather than on reflection; b) learning is often tacit and unconscious, and hence difficult to retrieve by researchers; and c) even in those instances when learning is conscious, volunteers have little time to sit down and write about such learning. It is pertinent to note that social movement learning does not occur only in clamorous massive demonstrations but also in the anonymity of regular quiet interactions in a variety of associational spaces and community settings. Learning in these spaces occurs within activity systems that mediate individual and social dimensions of learning (Engestrom, 2001).

Understanding the ways adults learn in social action is important because it provides insight into organizational strategies to create, foster, or improve learning opportunities that can help to promote sustainability. This leads to the third concept of our framework: informal learning.

Educational theorists have distinguished between formal, non-formal, and informal learning (Coombs, 1968, 1985; Coombs, Prosser, & Ahmed, 1973; Livingstone, 1999, 2006). Formal learning refers to the institutional ladder that goes from preschool to graduate studies. Non-formal learning refers to all organized educational programs that take place outside the formal school system and are usually short-term and voluntary. Informal learning is often thought to encompass all learning that occurs outside of the externally imposed curricula of formal and non-formal education subsystems, and hence it is learning that often occurs without the mediation of a teacher and evaluation mechanisms.

While this taxonomy is useful for understanding the types of learning people engage in, it is also important to recognize the fluidity of the boundaries between the different subsystems. In this regard, it is pertinent to distinguish between informal learning as a site and informal learning as a process. Informal learning as a site refers to the notion

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6 It should be noted that both the concept of sustainability and its division into three overlapping spheres are our analytical tools. While they are evident in the data we gathered, they mirror others' work on the topic more than they represent categories that emerged through the research process.

that most informal learning throughout our lives is located outside institutions with an explicit educational mandate (Beckerman, Burbules, & Silberman-Keller, 2006). This includes learning derived from a great variety of experiences—from reading a book and watching a film to conversations with friends and political engagement. Informal learning as a process refers to the notion that informal learning can also occur within formal or non-formal educational institutions, ranging from learning derived from the hidden curricula of formal school systems to informal discussions that occur during coffee breaks at adult education workshops. It is also relevant to mention that informal learning is not a homogeneous category. For instance, considering degrees of intentionality and awareness, Schugurensky (2000) identified three forms of informal learning: self-directed learning (intentional and conscious), incidental learning (unintentional but conscious), and learning through socialization (unintentional and unconscious). In social movements and community volunteering, a great deal of informal learning is unconscious, as it is acquired through daily interactions in different social settings and results in tacit knowledge, which Polanyi (1966) conceptualized as "we know more than we can tell" (p. 4). Such tacit knowledge (as well as skills and dispositions acquired through informal learning) often goes unrecognized by both the learner and the community organization itself.

The last concept of our framework is volunteer work. According to its classic definition, volunteer work is work that is unremunerated, freely chosen, and of benefit to society.[7] While we recognize that people contribute to the sustainability of their communities in many ways, in our study we focused on contributions made through volunteering. Although almost half of the adult Canadian population engages in some type of volunteering (Hall, Lasby, Gumulka, & Tryon, 2006), there has been little exploration of the informal learning that results from this activity. As we noted above, this is partly due to the tacit nature of this informal learning, but also to the fact that the explicit goal of volunteering is doing rather than learning (Cox, 2002). The scarce literature on learning through volunteering is usually found in articles on community service-learning (CSL). Since a common form of CSL encourages students to volunteer as part of a course, reports of learning outcomes are hardly surprising.[8] Some of the previous work on volunteer learning catalogues the learning of specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Carroll & Farooq, 2007; Elsdon, Reynolds, & Stewart, 1995; Ilsley, 1990; Narushima, 2005). Our article makes a contribution to this body of work by exploring the different areas in which volunteers have learned related to sustainability.

An important element to understand the shifting context of volunteer work in Canada can be identified in the drastic cuts of the 1990s and the downloading of many state functions to the non-profit sector and to the unpaid work of volunteers (Macduff, 2005; Miller, 1998). This shift is relevant to our exploration of volunteers' learning about sustainability in that many perceived this as an assault on the sustainability—in all three

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7 Elsewhere, we explored some of the challenges of defining volunteering activities such as unpaid internships, community service-learning as part of the high school curriculum, and community service as a rehabilitative part of the justice system (workfare). These activities are generally included as volunteering but often do not satisfy the condition of being freely chosen (Schugurensky & Mündel, 2005; see also Butin, 2003 and Holmes, 2006).

8 Another body of research on learning and volunteering can be found in studies on volunteer training and board training seminars (Skotnitsky & Ferguson, 2005), but this belongs to the field of non-formal education rather than to informal learning.

spheres—of their communities. This shift also had a significant impact on organizations' types of funding and commensurate restrictions on activities (Neysmith & Reitsma-Street, 2000). For instance, in some jurisdictions, if organizations take on a more service-provision role, they need to scale back their advocacy work or risk losing their funding. As we will see below, this shift resulted in particular learning for many of this study's participants.

Sustainability, social movement learning, informal learning, and volunteer work each bring to this research a lens that, when employed individually, provides illuminating insights. When brought together, these concepts help us to focus and see new issues and trends arising from within the movements we explore as our case studies.

Case Studies, Community Partners, and Methodology

We chose to do this research using case studies. The case study approach helps to define the problem, the context, the issues, and the lessons learned through the investigation of a specific site of inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For each one of the four case studies we worked with community organizations and networks. The first one was the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto and the Ontario region of the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada. The housing co-operative movement works from the principles of good housing that people can afford, security of tenure, safe and secure communities, control over the housing environment, community, and opportunities for personal growth (Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto, 2006). For the second case study we partnered with the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (OHCC), a network that brings together a broad-based group of social, environmental, economic, and political associations (Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, 2000). Using various approaches, the OHCC animators promote the development of rural and urban communities that are livable, equitable, and sustainable. Our sample came from volunteers in several groups and associations that are members of the coalition. For the third case we worked with WindShare, a wind energy generation co-operative, to probe deeper into the learning of volunteers who are committed to developing green energy. Using a co-operative organizational structure, WindShare members provided the financial and human resources needed to develop the first community-based renewable energy co-op in Toronto. For our fourth case study we worked with a loose network of farmers in Alberta who are committed to counterhegemonic and sustainable farming practices. Most of these farmers spend a great deal of time volunteering in various organizations that are part of the sustainable agriculture movement and with other local groups.

Case studies use extensive and multiple sources of information collection (Creswell, 1998). Our methodology included in-depth interviews and focus groups with approximately 100 participants. We were interested in looking at what member volunteers learned regarding the principles and goals of their organizations and how they enacted them in their community practices. All volunteers were asked to talk about what they learned from their volunteer work—at first as a broad and open-ended question and then with specific follow-up questions to elicit tacit learning.[9] Initially, when we asked research

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9 For details of the research methodology, please see other publications from this study (Duguid, 2007; Mündel, 2007; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2005; Mündel, K., Duguid, F., & Schugurensky, D., 2004; Schugurensky, 2006, Schugurensky, Mündel, & Duguid, 2006).

participants what they learned from volunteering, most either said "nothing" or gave a very brief answer. Based on previous research with members of participatory budgeting initiatives in Latin America and on pilot interviews in Canada, we asked participants whether they had learned specific knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices through their volunteering. This strategy worked very well: not only were participants able to identify a great variety of learning episodes on a variety of themes from the examples that we provided, but they were also able to add many more learning experiences that were not in our original list. In many instances they became aware of the intensity of the learning and of the impact of a particular learning experience in their current community practices. Many of the stories and examples provided by participants related to the three overlapping spheres of sustainability: social, economic, and ecological. These are taken up individually in the following three sections but are interrelated and connected later in the paper.

Findings: Learning Sustainability through Volunteering

The Social Sphere

Volunteers reported multiple instances of learning in the social sphere of sustainability as a result of their participation in their local communities. The social sphere comprises all of the relational aspects of a community from the micro-level of household to the macro-level of the decision-making process of a given polity. Among the elements of the social sphere noted by participants were social justice, participatory democracy, community spaces to actualize values, places to open and awaken diversity, and organizations that build healthy communities. In many cases, participants learned social co-operation from being part of mini-democracies through their service as board and committee members in co-operatives. Collective democratic self-management helped members to realize their own potential to improve their communities. As one participant reflected on her experience as a board member in a housing co-op, "I never had that opportunity before to know what I could do."

Similarly, most of the non-episodic volunteering took place in community organizations whose governance structures include some degree of democratic deliberation and decision-making. If democracy is not only a form of governance but also an associational process of community in the making (Dewey, 1916), it is clear the self-governance dimension of volunteers' work provides ample opportunities for nurturing these communities in the making through the development of a great variety of democratic competencies and dispositions such as trust, interpersonal relationships, self-governance, community building, communication skills, social co-operation, and teamwork.

In other cases, learning about the social sphere of sustainability came more from involvement in the local communities themselves. One volunteer in a community arts project notes that her work, which focused on particular problem neighbourhoods in the city, helped her to understand that "we have to listen to all groups of people, and we have to make it possible and meaningful for all people to participate." For others, the co-op experience helped them find a collective space to actualize their values through community-based action and make a positive contribution to society. As one volunteer recounted:

> There are people out there who want to be part of the solution. They want
> to be active. So much of what we do is disconnected . . . It goes back
> to the fact that people want to be part of the solution, but most of them
> don't recognize how to be. The co-op, WindShare, was such a bright
> light because it gave them an outlet for that.

Interactions among volunteers from different backgrounds were seen as opportunities for both mutual learning and community building. In the words of one volunteer, "When I see a minister, a pharmacist, and a hockey player all discussing together how to solve problems, that to me is what healthy communities is all about." Another important learning dimension of volunteer work, particularly through regular interactions in diverse communities, related to attitudinal shifts. Working with others means working across difference of opinions about fundamental values. In some cases, working with people with different ideas led to a shift in perceptions about "others". For example, in many instances, volunteers (from at least three case studies) talked about previously held convictions about gays and lesbians. Through their volunteer work—in many cases with people who openly identified as gay or lesbian—they challenged their previously held assumptions and adopted different approaches. In many of these cases, this process extended beyond acceptance of gays and lesbians to a broader openness to difference and to the development of personal friendships. As a volunteer from Northern Ontario commented, "For example, our group learning about gay, lesbian, and trans-gendered people has grown as a result of the depth and breadth of the work we do in trainings, and the level we take the trainings to."

An interesting twist to this situation occurred in the case of sustainable farming volunteers. In this case, farmers who were engaged in radical—and, therefore, challenging—agricultural practices and networks also volunteered with less overtly radical community organizations such as hospital boards, food banks, and youth groups. This juxtaposition of a radical approach to farming with relatively mainstream (i.e., the opposite of radical) avenues of volunteering suggests that this was in part a way of negotiating the challenge to the social norms expressed by their farming; their volunteering is a way of showing that they are still part of the community even while they are challenging its norms with regards to the practice of sustainable agriculture.

These and many other examples of volunteer learning that we identified in our study indicate that volunteers experience significant informal learning episodes that result in new knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and practices in regards to building socially sustainable communities.

The Ecological Sphere

Although the content and intensity of learning varied throughout the four case studies, most participants indicated that they had acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to the ecological sphere of sustainability. This sphere comprises the local and global environments in which communities are rooted. Among the most frequently mentioned were knowledge about specific toxins, awareness of how the ecological and social are related, understanding of causal relationships between different elements of a given ecosystem, skills such as

biodiversity monitoring and water testing, and attitudes such as caring for the environment and a disposition to translate ecological awareness into action.

Volunteers made frequent references to the acquisition of knowledge about ecological topics through non-formal education (workshops, conferences, seminars, etc.) as well as through informal (self-directed) learning, which usually consisted of reading specialized magazines or exploring the Internet. For instance, a volunteer from an aboriginal environmental group recalled: "I undertook a lot of research, which increased my understanding of ecological factors that are necessary for a community to be healthy." In many cases, groups and organizations were formed specifically with the purpose of learning about ecological issues. As one sustainable farmer noted, "We started one of the first [organic agriculture] groups in Alberta. We just started having meetings and put an organization together to share information." This highlights volunteers' recognition of the importance of learning to their ability to take action. It also is indicative of the deliberate steps taken to acquire new knowledge and share existing knowledge with others.

Volunteers also learned about the link between knowledge and action. For example, a volunteer from the OHCC said: "I'm learning that people need to have the knowledge that individual actions, like recycling and car idling, have an impact. If they know, they're more likely to do something about it." This volunteer also noted learning about ways in which organizations can be most effective in fostering these types of awareness-raising activities. Many volunteers also learned specific ecological skills such as testing water or assessing pollution levels as part of their activities. Others spoke about their learning related to attitudes conducive to a community's ecological sustainability. According to one volunteer:

> Living [in my housing co-op] for 12 years has affirmed a lot of what I
> believed before. It is important to live together and work together because
> it makes the world better. People care about the environment because there
> are children there; they aren't going to throw beer bottles on the ground.
> Instead they will recycle them. People will plant flowers because they want
> their place to be nice because children are living there . . . . After living at
> [the co-op] for 12 years, definitely, the principles and the values fit how I
> felt before living with the kinds of people around you.

Through involvement in the self-governance activities of the co-op board, this volunteer saw the importance of connecting abstract ideas of ecological protection with the concrete realities of the impact of the environment on children and other community members. For many, learning related to ecological sustainability helped them to make connections that extended beyond the boundaries of their community to the global political economy. In the WindShare case study, it became clear that the local ownership of energy generation provides something that multinationals do not: a connection with the ecology and community in which a green energy co-operative is established. As one member said, "I think it is probably a good thing because you care more about your local environment." Indeed, all members of WindShare live in the region. They breathe the air, they see the smog, they perhaps know the feeling of an asthma attack or have had to stay indoors on sunny days because of poor air quality or high UV levels. Members learned to develop close and caring relationships with their wind turbine because they own it, it is in their

geographic region, and they believe that it is helping (even if in small ways) with the ecological footprint of energy generation. As one volunteer put it:

> Whatever the turbine produces is not going to be produced at a coal-burning plant; I know it has done something for the environment. But I realize it is a speck of dust in comparison to everything else that is happening in the world. But everything counts.

Volunteers from each of the case studies have gained knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are in line with the main tenets of the ecological sphere of sustainability. Several participants indicated that they learned, through different sources and experiences, that ecological sustainability is part of a more holistic understanding of sustainability, and they made frequent references to the relationships between environmental, social, and economic sustainability. One volunteer commented, "I have become very aware of the interconnection between the environment, the economic base, and the social needs of the people."

The Economic Sphere

Volunteers mentioned learning many lessons related to the economic sphere of sustainability. Some of these lessons were internal to the organizations for which participants volunteered and others were external in nature. The informal learning reported by volunteers included how to work with limited financial resources, how to apply for grants and meet funders' reporting requirements, and understanding the economic relationships between a given organization and different levels of government. In regards to the latter, volunteers noted that they learned about the impacts of the cutbacks of the 1990s and about the shift of responsibilities from the state to the voluntary/non-profit sector for services such as housing and childcare. Some connected such learning to a better understanding of a model of development driven by economic policies that by and large have increased inequalities among and within countries, and that have put profits before people and nature. A few participants mentioned that they became familiar with the logic of economic neo-liberalism and its consequences for communities.

For example, one research participant wrote us a letter about the changes he has witnessed in the field of volunteering. He wrote: "The regrettable fact is that the neo-conservative trend in the management of federal, provincial, and municipal economies has covertly downloaded many of the services previously provided from tax revenues by civil servants or social service contractors to the volunteer sector." In other parts of his letter, he speaks about the toll that this download takes on the volunteers and on the few paid staff who remain.

Most volunteering undertaken by participants from the four case studies took place in the context of a voluntary-sector organization or a social movement. Many of those organizations work on a shoestring budget and so volunteers became acutely aware of the challenges of economic sustainability at the organizational level. As a housing co-op board member recounted, "It is very interesting to know how the co-op works: how we save money, how we get our resources; the regular Joe Blow doesn't have to think about those kinds of things." While there was certainly a great deal of learning of knowledge,

skills, and attitudes related to the financial side of organizations—a remarkable learning in and of itself—we were particularly interested in volunteers' learning that extended beyond their organizations to their communities.

One way in which this learning extended beyond the organization is by looking at the economic impact of a given activity. For example, a volunteer with WindShare mentioned that "health care expenses related to air pollution are worth billions of dollars in Ontario alone. . . . If you can't go to work because you are unwell, how does that affect the economy? And it is the whole world. I don't see it as just an Ontario or Toronto problem." This volunteer noted that by participating in WindShare and generating cleaner energy, one has the potential (even if it may be hard to measure) to decrease the amount the public pays for healthcare. As we talked to sustainable farmers in Alberta, several mentioned volunteering with different agricultural organizations to get a better sense of the economic arguments being made for and against agriculture. All family farms are under extreme financial duress—knowing first-hand the importance of economic sustainability— and getting a better sense of how this works at a systems level prepared these farmers to continue recruiting other farmers (and eaters) to their cause of ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable agriculture. As one farmer explained:

> It's a different model. Direct marketing, if a person wants to do that, you need people like my [farmer neighbours] on board who are willing to go to Edmonton or Camrose daily or at least bi-weekly because that's the nature of the beast. This value-added stuff is high labour—it's intensive—so you have to have people on board. I would love to have a model evolve here on my farm that can be transported not only to Saskatchewan, Manitoba, or northern Alberta, but also to Zimbabwe, or Tanzania.

This third sphere of sustainability is often labeled as the bad guy by many sustainability advocates; however, learning about the economic side of sustainability is vital to shifting dominant ideologies, to surviving economic crunches, and to developing evidence supporting change. There is a pragmatic case to be made for thinking about how economic sustainability—particularly at an organizational level—can advance the broader goals of moving beyond economic growth as a primary measure of sustainability of community health, and to think about a more sustainable economic system that reduces wealth inequalities and protects natural resources.

Conclusions: Building Sustainable Communities One at a Time

In this paper we used a conceptual framework that includes sustainability, social movement learning, informal learning, and volunteer work to help us understand the content of what community-based volunteers learn regarding sustainability through their volunteer work. Our four case studies highlighted that volunteers are learning important lessons for the advancement of their communities and for working towards sustainability. Those lessons were many and varied, from learning about reducing the energy footprint through renewable energy generation to political economy analysis, civic virtues, or democratic self-governance. While we have disaggregated learning according to the three main dimensions of sustainability (social, ecological, and economic as suggested by prior work on the topic), many volunteers spoke eloquently about learning to establish relationships among these

areas. As one volunteer noted, "It is back to that notion of sustainable thinking: I learned that all of those areas are intimately related." Others talked about the educational role that their volunteer efforts could play in showing the relationships between the different aspects of sustainable communities. One sustainable farmer who was quite involved in the Slow Food movement—which brings together farmers, food preparers, and eaters to celebrate locally unique food—referred to this in the following terms: "For me, the Slow Food thing is that I would like to provide education for consumers. I'd like to be able to tour people and explain what we are doing on our farm and in our community."

As this farmer notes, an important aspect of achieving greater sustainability is learning and teaching about innovative practices and successful models, which act both as inspiration (pedagogy of example) and as catalysts to bring people together as part of a movement.

These initiatives can help to translate informal learning into non-formal education activities and programs, and at the same time provide inspiration and guidance to other collectives. Such pedagogy of example adds a third dimension to the two dimensions of social movement learning already identified by Hall and Clover (2005). Indeed, besides the internal learning acquired by members of a given movement and the external learning acquired by society at large, it is the horizontal learning that flows from the teaching and learning among members of similar organizations who are at different levels in their trajectories (Rogers, 2006), as well as the learning between members and non-members of the social movements.

While each case study varies regarding the type of volunteer work undertaken and the concomitant learning derived from it, our paper has emphasized some common learning experiences around sustainability-related learning in community settings. Through their volunteer work, participants learned a great variety of skills related to the sustainable functioning of a community. They also developed attitudes and values conducive to a vibrant democratic community, such as appreciating diversity and nurturing inclusiveness in deliberative and decision-making processes. They developed a great deal of knowledge related to community sustainability by taking a holistic view of different sectors and social dynamics among them. Last but not least, they reported significant changes in their daily practices. In sum, volunteers in the various communities under analysis reported to have learned skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values that help to support sustainability, and have worked to implement sustainability practices that, as Milne (2003) points out, give meaning through the context of everyday life and particularly in the context of community.

We hope that the findings reported in this paper help to connect the field of adult education with those of sustainability, volunteerism, social movement learning, and community activism. Those who participate as volunteers in community organizations or are members of social movements often focus on the direct outcomes of their activities, such as a particular change in policy or the number of people fed a warm meal. In this article, we have focused on a more intangible—yet significant—product of those activities: the informal learning experienced by volunteers, particularly those that are related to the three pillars of sustainability. More awareness of the depth and breadth of volunteers' informal learning—including but not limited to sustainability—can help to increase the recognition of the value of volunteers' activities for themselves and for society, and can

help organizations develop strategies to nurture and maximize that learning. Adult educators can play significant roles in assisting organizations and social movements to encourage, support, and bring together the vast informal learning acquired by individual members through collective initiatives in order to aid those organizations in the construction of more sustainable communities.

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