Community Report: Sustainability Report Card & Public Engagement Project

For Community Residents & Leaders in the Clarenville, Bonavista, & Isthmus of Avalon Regions

Executive Summary

This report discusses the outcomes of a public engagement project carried out in 2016 in the Bonavista, Clarenville, and Isthmus of Avalon regions. The project built on a community-based research project conducted between Memorial University and the Regional Council of the former Clarenville-Bonavista Rural Secretariat region. The goal of this project was to disseminate a set of indicators from the previous study that measured the region's sustainability, and prompt discussion among local leaders about how to use this information to inform regional governance. This was done primarily by creating a 'Sustainability Report Card' for the Rural Secretariat region and conducting further engagement with local leaders about how to use this project to identify new regional development opportunities and encourage collaboration between different communities, sectors, and organizations. This project sought to incorporate input from local leaders
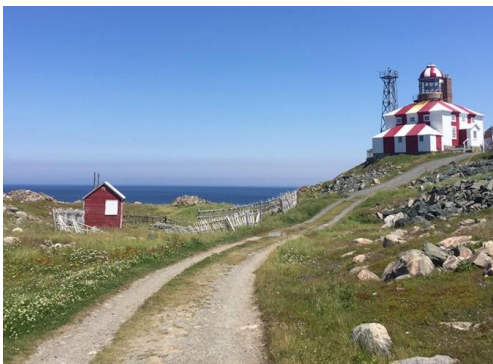

Figure 1. The historic Cape Bonavista Lighthouse.

and respond to the interests and concerns of community members at every point possible, which led the project to focus on further regional engagement efforts within the region. This project led to several outcomes, including the Report Card document itself, proposed revisions to the indicators for future use in the Bonavista region, and a directory of regional organizations. The project also fostered dialogue about how best to monitor and enhance

Figure 2. Clarenville seen from Bare Mountain. Credit: Our Town Clarenville.

regional sustainability. This report recommends several next steps for local leaders, who are encouraged to continue supporting collaborative regional initiatives and dialogues and consider the use of these findings in devising a regional development strategy. We also encourage local leaders to consider organizing a regional forum to initiate this process, and identify local assets that could serve as a starting place for strategic planning and assessment at a pilot scale.

Contents

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Regional Overview

This project focused on the former Clarenville-Bonavista Rural Secretariat Region. This designation encompassed three distinct regions with their own unique features: the Isthmus of Avalon region, the Clarenville region, and the Bonavista region.

The Isthmus region is located between the Avalon Peninsula and the rest of Newfoundland. It includes communities such as Arnold's Cove, Goobies, and Chapel Arm. All communities in the region are close to the Trans-Canada Highway. Due in part to this transportation access, the Isthmus region is home to some of the province's largest industrial developments, including the North Atlantic refinery in Come-by-Chance, the Vale nickel processing facility in Long Harbour, and the Bull Arm Site. Some fishing and fish processing also takes place.

Clarenville is the largest community in all of the regions and is home to many government offices, public services, and retail shopping options. Outside of Clarenville lie many smaller communities such as Port Blandford, Lethbridge, and Hodge's Cove. There

is significant economic activity in Clarenville in sectors like retail and government services, as well as agriculture and timber processing in Lethbridge, and fisheries activity. Some accommodations are also available to tourists passing through the area.

The Bonavista region is home to significant cultural heritage assets and outdoor opportunities, making it a major tourism destination. Communities like Bonavista and Trinity have begun to recover from the 1992 Cod Moratorium, in part through tourism and related industries. Historically one of the province's primary fishing areas, the region still relies substantially on fisheries. The arts have become a significant activity in the region, with numerous galleries and artists in the region, as well as the Rising Tide Theatre in Trinity. The Bonavista region is currently in a process of social and economic renewal, with communities such as Bonavista, Elliston, and Port Union emerging from the hardships of the Moratorium through entrepreneurship, place-based tourism, and heritage preservation.

Newfoundland and Labrador Rural Governance Context

Rural regions across NL are facing threats to their long-term sustainability. Issues such as out-migration, volatile markets, and changes in fisheries pose great challenges to small communities that often have limited capacity to adapt to these issues.[1] Many communities have begun to explore collaborative regional approaches to rural governance such as service-sharing agreements, joint councils, and regionally-based economic development. However, regional collaboration requires support from government agencies, which has been gradually withdrawn from rural NL. From the phasing out of the Rural Development Associations (RDAs) in the 1990s, to the dismantling of the Regional Economic Development (RED) Boards in 2012, to the elimination of the Rural Secretariat in 2016, institutional support for rural development at the provincial level has all but disappeared.[2] Today, rural regions have few institutional supports within government to enable regional collaboration and support the sustainability of rural NL.

Figure 3. Map of the three regions involved in the project: Bonavista, Clarenville, and Isthmus of Avalon regions. Credit: Myron King, Environmental Policy Institute, Grenfell Campus of Memorial University.

Measuring Sustainability in Rural Regions

One potential way to support more collaborative rural governance and planning is to define and measure the sustainability of rural regions. Sustainability indicators (SIs) have been used in many communities to identify a common vision for progress and monitor changes over time. SIs can improve communication and trust among people from diverse backgrounds and sectors, even helping to reduce conflicts.[3] Many communities have used SIs to monitor well-being over time, with social learning outcomes like improving understanding of key local issues and reflecting collectively on what it means to have a sustainable community.[4]

However, measuring sustainability can only be meaningful if it is defined in a way that is appropriate for local rural contexts. Instead of a vague, top-down notion of sustainable development, there must be a locally-defined vision for sustainable rural communities and regions informed by the unique factors that contribute to the well-being of people in rural NL. Important things to consider are the strong sense of connection that rural Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans often feel towards their communities and the crucial role that fisheries play in both the economy and way of life in many rural regions. Rural sustainability is best assessed through an Asset-Based Community Development mindset, which focuses on strengths and capacities that are often overlooked in more needs-based models of development, allowing for communities to build on their strongest assets in new development initiatives.[5]
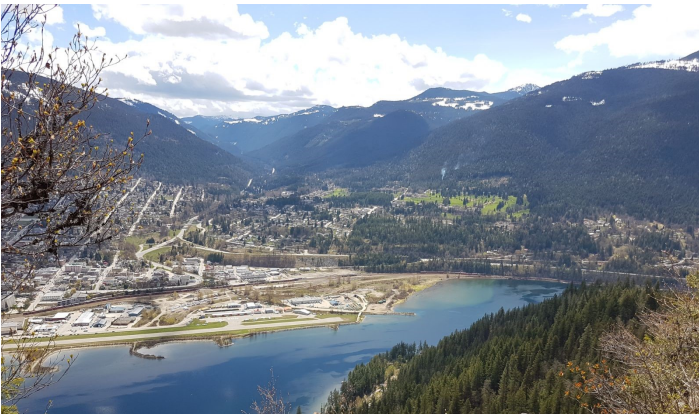

Figure 4. Kootenays region, B.C., home of the 'State of the Basin' sustainability indicator initiative. Credit: Kelly Vodden.

SIs have been used in numerous rural regions in Canada. Some examples are the Kootenays region of B.C., whose 'State of the Basin' report has been maintained to showcase key indicators of regional well-being[6]; the Fraser Basin Council, which developed indicators for a region in B.C. including both rural and urban areas[7]; and Indigenous communities such as the Little Red River Cree Nation and the Naskapi Nation.[8] Such initiatives can support collaboration between communities and sectors and encourage more locally-informed decision-making. In this way, SIs may serve as "part of a wider process of shared strategic agenda building [that] starts from the question: 'where are we now, and where would we like to go in the future?'"[9]

Project Background & Objectives

This project builds on a community-based research project that developed a set of indicators to assess the Clarenville-Bonavista Rural Secretariat region's progress towards sustainability. The previous study, conducted jointly between Memorial University and the Regional Council of the Clarenville-Bonavista Rural Secretariat region, reviewed literature on the use of SIs in rural regions and developed indicators that measured the region's ecological, socio-cultural, and economic well-being.[10] Public engagement methods such as a survey of 299 residents and workshops informed the indicators. A major recommendation was to make its findings publicly available in a format that would be accessible and user-friendly.[11] This project aimed to fulfill these recommendations by meeting the following objectives:

1. Create a **Report Card** that displays these indicators and evaluates the region's progress towards sustainability
2. Propose Report Card as part of an **ongoing process of monitoring** well-being and long-term sustainability in the regions involved
3. Propose **revisions to the indicator framework** for future iterations
4. **Identify the key regional stakeholders** who should be engaged in future regional efforts to monitor and enhance sustainability
5. Offer recommendations for **linking sustainability monitoring efforts to regional governance**

Report Card Design, Creation, & Dissemination

The current project began with a literature review on case studies of sustainability reporting at the community and regional level. In Winter 2015-2016, discussions began with Regional Council to define the goals of the project. Early prototypes of the Report Card were designed and presented to Regional Council, with different options for size, visual displays, and how to evaluate the indicators. We also met with 13 local leaders in different sectors to gain context about regional issues and write a series of 'Good News Stories' about local organizations making a positive impact in their communities, which we included in the Report Card. These stories are described further in the Project Outcomes, as well as on the project website, which is available at regionalsustainability.ruralresilience.ca/case-studies/clarenville-bonavista-region/success-stories/

We then held community workshops to gather public input on the Report Card and the assessment of the regional sustainability indicators. The workshops were held in Port Union, Clarenville, and Arnold's Cove in February 2016. This participatory evaluation was important because we wished to give a clear, easily understandable assessment of each indicator in the Report Card based on both relevant benchmarks, like the provincial average, and residents' perspectives. This input allowed us to evaluate each indicator on a scale of Excellent, Good, Moderate, and Poor, and note whether the indicators were improving or getting worse in recent years.

Next, we compiled a draft Report Card in collaboration with Regional Council. We held two public presentations in Clarenville and Port Union to present the drafts and receive final feedback. Two print versions of the Report Card were created (one short and one long), and over 1,500 copies were distributed in communities throughout the region. The dissemination of the Report Card would not have been possible without the members of Regional Council, who advised that the most effective method would be for them to share copies with their personal and professional networks in their communities. Given that the members of Regional Council live in communities across each region, this method ensured an even coverage while ensuring that key local organizations were given copies, such as municipalities, local service districts, non-profits, and local businesses. Regional Council members also helped project coordinator Brennan Lowery to introduce the Report Card at a number of public meetings in the region and assisted in the distribution of the document to attendees.

Further Regional Engagement

After creating the Report Card, we wished to continue discussions with local leaders about how to build on this effort to support regional planning and governance. Based on public input, we decided that it was more appropriate to focus on one region as opposed to the larger Rural Secretariat region, which many community members felt did not represent their local regional boundaries and networks. At the same time, the Rural Secretariat was dissolved in April 2016. Thus, following an expression of interest from local leaders in the Bonavista region, we decided to focus efforts in that region for the remainder of the project. These activities were conducted while the project coordinator (Lowery) lived in Bonavista during summer 2016, allowing for more in-depth learning about the region through observation and daily experiences. Responding to local leaders' interest in gaining information on methods for monitoring regional sustainability, we invited an international expert to speak with key stakeholders in the Bonavista region. On June 20th, 2016 the Bonavista-Trinity Regional Chamber of Commerce and the project team held a seminar featuring Dr. John Dagevos, the director of the Telos Brabant Centre for Sustainable Development in the Netherlands, who has worked in regional sustainability monitoring for over two decades. This discussion brought together 16 regional leaders from non-profit, public, and private sectors. Finally, we met with 14 key stakeholders across the region to collect recommendations for how this project could be built on in future efforts to support regional governance and received input on an initial list of regional organizations that were included in a directory of regional organizations (discussed in Project Outcomes).

There are both tangible and intangible outcomes that resulted from this project. In addition to the substantive outcomes discussed below, the project also relied on, and hopefully helped to foster, an ongoing dialogue between community members, researchers, and the public about how to define, measure, and enhance regional well-being. The following sections discuss the project's tangible outcomes, along with the ways that these contributed to dialogue and exchange between participants.

Report Card

The primary outcome of this project was the creation of the Report Card pamphlet. The Report Card shared the findings of the previous research with local residents and leaders, thus making public data accessible to local stakeholders to support more informed decision-making. The data used to measure the region's sustainability indicators, which were gathered during the previous study, were mostly sourced from public data sources such as Community Accounts and Statistics Canada, but also included the results of the public survey of 299 residents. The assessment offered in the Report Card displays this information in a user-friendly and understandable format with a clear evaluation of how the region is doing. It is our hope that the assessment offered in the Report Card can provide a basis for more informed local decision-making. A website was also created that displays information about the project, the previous community-based research that led to it, and the findings of the Report Card. Visit http://regionalsustainability.ruralresilience.ca/ to learn more.

One of the key features of the Report Card was the inclusion of 'Good News Stories', which allowed us to highlight positive developments from communities across the region, following the Asset-Based Community Development approach of building on the strengths of communities. These discussions also allowed us to share information about the project and gain a better understanding of individuals and organizations that are leading community development efforts across the three regions.

The final outcome that came from the Report Card was an improved understanding by the project team about the distinctness of each of the three regions involved in the project. During public consultations, community members stressed that the boundaries of the Rural Secretariat region did not accurately reflect the economic and socio-cultural realities of the regions with which they identified. Although our partnership with Regional Council led to using the Rural Secretariat region as the scope for the Report Card, we felt that any future exploration of regional governance should focus on each of the three regions individually.

Figure 5. The Good News Stories in the Report Card allowed us to learn about promising initiatives like Sunnyside's water treatment pilot. Credit: Robert Snook.

Proposed Revisions to Bonavista Region Indicators

The second major outcome of the project was a proposed set of revisions to the sustainability indicator framework from the Report Card, with a specific focus on the Bonavista region. We prepared these revisions because local leaders in this region were interested in doing another iteration of indicators to monitor the region's sustainability in the future, but felt that there would need to be new indicators to measure unique aspects of well-being in the Bonavista region. The seminar held in June 2016 on monitoring regional sustainability provided models and lessons from real-world experience for how this could be done. To that end, we reorganized the indicators from the Report Card according to a framework informed by the Telos model - based in three forms of community capital (natural capital, economic capital, and socio-cultural capital) - and identified new potential indicators based on input from local leaders and observations. For the Report

Card indicators, of which there were originally 50, we conducted a gap analysis of the availability of data at the Bonavista region level. The detailed results of this indictor gap analysis are available at regionalsustainability.ruralresilience.ca/reports-and-resources/

Overall, the gap analysis revealed that much of the public data used in the Report Card are not currently at a good quality for measuring current well-being in the Bonavista region. This is due to the fact that Census data from 2011, the most recent year with full data released, often do not have data available for Local Areas, which are the only geographic level that include both municipalities and residents living in LSDs or unincorporated areas. Thus, many of the indicators can only be measured using data that are over 10 years old, which do not accurately reflect current conditions. However, other indicators do have 2011 Census data or are based on the survey conducted as part of the prior research in the region in 2015. Data quality will improve soon as the 2016 Census results are released. However, we recommend that additional public input is needed to identify how these and other data can measure the unique assets that contribute to the well-being of the Bonavista region. This input would ensure that a future sustainability assessment finds locally appropriate ways to assess vital regional assets, like the sense of place that residents feel to their communities or the role of the arts in sustaining the region. This effort, by determining what data are currently available at the regional level, can inform future attempts to identify and monitor regional well-being assets.

Figure 6. A historic saltbox home in Maberly. Residents of the Bonavista region have a strong sense of place rooted in built heritage and other community assets.

Bonavista Regional Sustainability Directory

The final outcome of this project was a directory of local organizations that may be in a position to engage in future efforts of monitoring regional sustainability and fostering regional governance in the Bonavista region. A recurring theme in discussions with local stakeholders throughout the project was that there is no agreed-upon strategy for regional development that represents the visions and interests of multiple communities and sectors. Echoing these concerns, we recommend that a process be initiated to create a regional development strategy (described in Recommendations & Next Steps). In support of this, we created a directory of key organizations operating in the region who we believe would need to be actively engaged in such a process in order for the resulting strategy to reflect the region's diverse communities, sectors, and development priorities.

Several considerations influenced the creation of this directory. First, we wanted to ensure that the directory incorporated input from key stakeholders who were identified during the course of the project. To that end, we provided draft copies of the directory to 14 local leaders with whom we met in August 2016, who gave crucial guidance to its creation. These leaders work in communities across the region, including Bonavista, Trinity, Port Union, Elliston, Port Rexton, Summerville, and Duntara, and represent public, private, and non-profit sectors. Second, we wanted to build on previous efforts in the region of a similar nature, leading us to incorporate as much as we could from the Cabot Loop Directory of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations, created by the Community Sector Council in 2010. Finally, we wanted to ensure that the directory covered a broad scope of sustainability issues. Thus, we organized the directory using the Community Capital framework previously mentioned, and selected a diverse set of local leaders to give input on the directory, who have expertise on regional issues such as the built environment, education, entrepreneurship, housing, fisheries, and heritage preservation. The directory is available at regionalsustainability.ruralresilience.ca/reports-and-resources/

Recommendations from Bonavista Region Leaders

This report concludes with a series of practical recommendations for how regional leaders could build on this project's findings, ideally in collaboration with partners at Memorial University. These recommendations are focused on the Bonavista region, but we strongly encourage stakeholders in the Clarenville and Isthmus regions to consider their relevance for their own regions and to explore similar collaborative approaches to regional governance. The following recommendations are based directly on the input of local leaders from the Bonavista region which we collected in August 2016, from which we identified what we believe are the most salient priorities for regional leaders to pursue in future efforts. These comments have been anonymized to respect the confidentiality of the people who made them.

1. Integrated Regional Development Strategy

The most cross-cutting recommendation was the need for a comprehensive development strategy for the Bonavista region. Local leaders expressed that the current system for designing and implementing community development projects is dysfunctional, citing challenges such as frequent competition between communities and organizations due to the lack of core funding for development work. These challenges were often discussed in the context of provincial rural development policy, which many leaders saw as extremely inadequate. Potential institutional reforms were discussed, such as the formation of a regional development council or some kind of county system, but these were seen as long-term aspirations. In the short term, local leaders saw the development of an integrated regional development strategy as a valuable first step for exploring some of these options and identifying common development priorities for the region. Caution was expressed about the need for an equitable process so that no communities, organizations, or sectors are excluded from

participating in developing the strategy. Existing examples of regional cooperation were discussed, such as regionally-based tourism product development, the regional focus of the Bonavista-Trinity Regional Chamber of Commerce, and the joint council initiative between six municipalities in the region.

Perspectives on Future Directions:

Work Toward a Regional Approach
- Need for a regional approach to development
- Regional boundaries must reflect local patterns of interaction – 'There's no point in having a regional council that's based on a region that isn't organic'
- Build on successes that have brought the region together (e.g. tourism industry)

Enhance Cross-Sector and Cross-Community Collaboration
- Collaboration between private, non-profit, and public sector
- Improve communication and build trust
- Government should recognize contributions of the non-profit sector in sustaining communities

Reduce Funding Challenges
- Reduce cycle of dependency where local organizations are 'forced to beg to the provincial government for funding'
- Need for pool of funds on a region-wide basis (rather than each organization applying on a project by project basis and often competing with peers)

Regional Governance Options
- Solutions must be organized from the bottom-up, not imposed by government
- Explore regional governance options, e.g. formal county system or informal economic development committee
- Need for a rural development policy at provincial level to support and enable regional bodies

Developing a Regional Development Strategy
- Need to encompass broad development agenda, not just economic development
- Need for a strategy that benefits everybody, must not exclude certain communities or sectors

2. Assessment of Regional Well-being & Sustainability

Local leaders were also interested in a sustainability assessment for the Bonavista region. This was often identified as a necessary follow-up to the Report Card. Several options were explored, including the adaptation of the indicators from the Report Card, the use of an externally developed sustainability indicators framework, or the development of an inventory of regional assets. However, this effort would have to have clear local application and utility, and not be a simple asset mapping exercise without a clear outcome. Several local leaders saw value in such an assessment in the context of anticipated loss of provincial government support for key local services, with a regional assessment serving to document the impact of these core services on local well-being. Other potential benefits were discussed such as demonstrating the positive impact of recent private sector investment in communities like Bonavista, and documenting the contribution that non-profit organizations make to community well-being.

Perspectives on Future Directions:

Demonstrate the Value of Local Assets
- Regional inventory of assets would be of great value
- Quantify the value of core regional services to make the case to government to maintain them
- Need to build on what has already has been done to identify regional assets (one person felt that another asset mapping exercise for heritage assets 'would just be a waste of time')
- Need to show cohesion between business and non-profits and their impacts on the region

Measuring Regional Well-being Going Forward
- Need to document the region's successes
- New Report Card could act as a baseline to show the impact of future regional development or governance
- Indicators could support regional development planning by providing long-term goals, showing ways to measure progress towards them
- Show qualitative and quantitative sides of regional well-being ('both the statistics and the stories')

3. Focus on Heritage Assets

Although there was a general consensus that the strategy would need to be holistic and not singularly focused on a single theme or sector, many local leaders felt that a good first step would be to do targeted strategic planning on a common asset in the region at a pilot scale. Perhaps the most unifying asset identified were related to heritage. Leaders often cited the pivotal role that heritage restoration has played in the renewal of communities like Bonavista, Elliston, Port Union, and Trinity, while still highlighting the derelict state of many heritage buildings in the region. In general, stakeholders felt that heritage represented a source of common ground between most communities in the region and viewed it as a fruitful space where exploratory region-wide planning or project development could occur to build on existing efforts.

Perspectives on Future Directions:

- Heritage would be the easiest thing to start with
- Built heritage already well understood in each municipality in the region
- Restoration of built heritage a major part of renewal in many communities (e.g. Bonavista, Trinity, Elliston, Port Union)
- Many heritage buildings at risk of being demolished in communities like Duntara, Port Union
- We can't just save the buildings: restoration needs to be part of a larger agenda

4. Forum on Regional Development & Governance

In response to the identified opportunities and challenges facing regional governance, many local leaders felt that there should be a regional forum where local stakeholders could work together on creating an initial development strategy. There were many different perspectives on the scope and format of such an event, with some leaders recommending a more informal bonding experience emphasizing fun and trust-building, while others stressed the need to generate deliverables and subsequent commitments to action. This forum could potentially 'set the stage'

for regional planning efforts to follow, and its success would depend on the full participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as high-quality facilitation, potentially from the Harris Centre. Stakeholders stressed the need for extensive pre-planning of the event in an inclusive manner, and also felt that sufficient follow-up should occur in the form of further work in sub-committees or working groups. Considerations were given such as the need for organizing leaders at the level of communities and smaller sub-regions prior to such an effort. There was also an emphasis on the need for the forum to focus on specific objectives and avoid generalities or discussion that does not lead to action.

Perspectives on Future Directions:

Purpose of Forum
- Set the stage for more in-depth strategic planning
- Needs to have clear outcomes and follow-up
- Be specific and about solutions, not about 'the same stuff that we have been talking about for years'
- Can't just be about one issue, but be holistic
- Would need to be sub-committees based on different themes or working groups
- Could have a component of identifying strengths/ assets, as well as a needs assessment, and the identification of strategies/actions

Getting Everyone to the Table
- Must have the right people there to participate
- Need to have 'everyone at the table', otherwise it would not be meaningful
- The planning process would likely be just as important as the actual event
- Need to find ways to engage 'regular community members', not just the leaders who always come to community meetings (the 'usual suspects')
- Need for meaningful government representation (TCII, ACOA, etc.) at a forum or in sub-committees
- Could learn from previous initiatives like Alliances for Community Engagement, which organized workshops in the region that increased trust between non-profit and private sectors
- Bring people together in their own sub-regions first (e.g. Trinity Bight, Bonavista Bay side) and then work together across the region

Format of Forum
- Could have a format of a 2-3 day conference
- Include something joyous that brings organizations and communities together to build trust
- Would have to have a great facilitator
- Would be wonderful if MUN (specifically the Harris Centre) helped organize the forum and facilitated it

Next Steps

In light of these recommendations, we offer a number of specific steps that leaders in the Bonavista region could take to build on the project and maximize the potential for regional governance and collaboration. In suggesting these next steps, we envision Memorial University as an active partner and support to rural regions, and the report authors specifically express a commitment to continue supporting regional development efforts in the Bonavista region. With that in mind, we suggest that local leaders in the Bonavista region consider the following actions:

1. Continue to support regionally-based initiatives, such as the Bonavista-Trinity Regional Chamber of Commerce and the joint council initiative

2. Seek platforms for regional dialogue that bring together a diversity of sectors and communities to discuss issues of common concern and find common ground

3. Consider how the outcomes of this project could be used to support the development of an integrated regional development strategy

4. Consider the prospect of organizing a regional development forum, as well as the most appropriate scope and realistic outcomes that such an event could achieve

5. Identify strong regional well-being assets that could serve as a starting place for strategic planning and assessment at a pilot scale

6. Explore opportunities for Memorial University to play a role in each of the above actions, as well as other partners at the provincial level (e.g. Municipalities Newfoundland & Labrador, provincial and federal agencies, foundations)

Local Contributors & Partners

This project would not have been possible without the extensive support and collaboration from the following local partners who contributed their time, ideas, and energy into the project:

- The members of the former Clarenville-Bonavista Regional Council
- Bonavista-Trinity Regional Chamber of Commerce
- College of the North Atlantic (Clarenville and Bonavista Campuses)
- 2 Rooms Art Gallery
- Ability Employment Corporation
- Bonavista Historic Townscape Foundation
- Bonavista Living
- Boreal Diner
- Strat Canning
- Champney's West Heritage Group
- Chantal and Mark Dickson
- Greg Dominaux, NL Office of Public Engagement
- Fisher's Loft Inn
- Bob Gammon
- Patricia Hewitt
- Home from the Sea Foundation
- Barry Pearce
- Random Age-Friendly Communities
- Rising Tide Theatre
- Sir William Ford Coaker Heritage Foundation
- Town of Come-by-Chance
- Town of Sunnyside
- Trinity Historical Society

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Funding & Support

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