

# Chapter 21

## The Ethics of Participatory Processes: Dynamic Flux, Open Questions

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**Abstract** Collaboration and participation are widely emphasized in environmental planning and management. This chapter describes a discussion group on the ethics of participatory processes, raises the possibility of translating the non-equilibrium or dynamic flux view of ecological complexity into a view of ethics and social action, and introduces five ideals for a “dynamic flux ethics”—engagement, participation, cultivating collaborators, transversality, and fostering curiosity. These ideals are linked to a schema woven out of the discussion group’s contributions. What sense of stewardship might come from participatory processes informed by this initial exploration of dynamic flux ethics is left as an open question.

**Keywords** Curiosity • Dialogue • Dynamic flux • Engagement • Transversality

The most important parts of any conversation are those that neither party could have imagined before starting. Isaacs (1999), *Dialogue*

[T]he challenge [is to] bring... into interaction not only a wider range of researchers, but a wider range of social agents, and to... keep... them working through differences and tensions until plans and practices are developed in which all the participants are invested. Taylor (2005), *Unruly Complexity*

“As I said at the beginning,” [he] shouted, “you’ll cut and run.” Jon stood holding the door. The edge of the wood was between his fingers. “I told you. I have these questions to ask. Open questions.” Williams (1985), *Loyalties*

A key principle of dialogue is to balance advocacy (making a statement) with inquiry (seeking clarifications and understanding). In a chapter that will be read after the author has finished writing, this principle is difficult to follow. Nevertheless, let me try to create for readers some of the experience of participatory processes, starting by putting two questions on the table: Do the ethics of participatory processes lead participants to Earth Stewardship? Given that I am unsure of this,

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where do my loyalties lie in relation to the purpose of the volume or, more broadly, of sustaining diverse life on earth? To indicate why these are open questions as well as to articulate my sense of ethics, participation, and Earth Stewardship, I start by describing a discussion group on the ethics of collaborative or participatory processes that met during the 2011 Cary conference “Linking Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World.” I then raise the possibility of translating the non-equilibrium or dynamic flux view of ecological complexity (Pickett 2013) into a view of ethics and social action. The final section introduces five ideals for a “dynamic flux ethics,” referring at points to a schema woven out of the discussion group’s contributions. There is advocacy in these three sections but of a form conducive, I hope, of further inquiry by readers. Indeed, you may seek clarifications and understanding of suggestions made and questions raised in this chapter, but try to balance a desire to be convinced or to have compelling examples provided with a sense of conversation with a fellow inquirer into “what exists and what could exist” (Foucault 1996). To enhance the sense of unfolding inquiry, some matters that were settled for me before starting are placed in appendices.

## **21.1 The Ethics of Collaborative or Participatory Processes: From Discussion Group to a Picture**

As Taylor et al. (2011) note, “collaboration has become a dominant concern in environmental planning and management since the 1990s (Margerum 2008) [and] the need to organize collaborative environmental research can be traced back at least as far as the tropical rainforest ecosystem projects led by H.T. Odum in the 1950s and ’60s.” This emphasis makes sense at two levels (elaborated in Appendix 1): Collaboration produces results that are either a 1. *Sum of the Parts* (combining multiple perspectives, extending over time, and spanning distance); or 2. *Greater than the Sum of the Parts* (generating new perspectives, ensuring durability of outcomes, developing capacities).

With a view to combining multiple perspectives, generating new ones, and developing capacities, it seemed appropriate during a conference aiming to link “Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World,” to convene a discussion group on the ethics of collaborative or participatory processes, and, moreover, to run the group using participatory processes. A record of the group’s three sessions, including some audio files, was kept and can be accessed at Taylor (2011). Table 21.1 provides an outline of the sessions. Because text cannot capture the experience of engaging in participatory sessions, the outline is included to intrigue readers enough to explore for themselves the processes listed and to convey the source of a schema that is to be built on in Sect. 21.3.

**Table 21.1** Outline of sessions of a participatory discussion group on the ethics of participatory processes

<i>Session 1—Autobiographical introductions</i>
At the start, four principles for participatory processes were presented:
P1. Facilitators should not try to lead without arranging assistants and support
P2. Participants always know a lot about the topic at hand, so bring that to the surface and acknowledge it
P3. Respect for other participants and for ourselves is the first objective, on which basis participants are more comfortable taking Risks that lead to Revelations (new insights) and, through the experience of generating those insights, get Re-engaged with our work and lives (Taylor et al. 2011)
P4. Do not leave any session without taking stock of where we have come, individually and collectively
The session consisted of the following activities (with corresponding principles in parentheses):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guided Freewriting (Taylor and Szeiter 2012, pp. 89–90) starting from “When I think about the questions I have about participatory processes around environment, science, ethics, action, what comes to mind includes...” (P2, P3)</li> <li>• Share in pairs our hopes for the discussion group (P2, P3)</li> <li>• Autobiographical introductions: Each person takes 5 min to convey how you came to be the kind of person who would be invited to this Cary conference and join a discussion group on ethics of participatory process (P3)</li> <li>• Share in pairs “connections and extensions” seen among the introductions, including things you didn’t include that you might have (P2, P3, P4)</li> <li>• Two assistants arranged to confer with facilitator about next session (P1)</li> <li>• Closing circle: “Something you’re taking away from this session to chew on” (P4). (The audio linked to Taylor 2011 includes mention, among other things, of the diversity of motivations to participate and diverse kinds of participation, the difficulty of communicating and incorporating different values and perspectives, and the challenge of moving to action and making a difference.)</li> </ul>
<i>Session 2—Dialogue and Rapid small-group work</i>
Two activities explored whether and how ethics of some kind can inform participatory process in relation to linking environment, science, and action:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dialogue process (P2, P3, P4)—90 min of listening and structured turn-taking on the topic (Taylor and Szeiter 2012, pp. 70–75). (One provocative query emerging from the dialogue was whether ethics is possible <i>without</i> participatory processes.)</li> <li>• Rapid small-group work (P2)—20 min to create and report on a “Program for developing an ethical framework for participatory processes, with special attention to interaction among diverse social agents.” (The activity served primarily as a warm-up for the homework and third session. Themes from end-of-session reports included sustained engagement in listening, having stories be heard, and the tension between incremental progress and taking on Big Issues.)</li> </ul>
Between-session homework: Compose five statements, questions, or reservations that are important to you concerning development of an ethical framework for participatory processes
(continued)

**Table 21.1** (continued)*Session 3—Future Ideal Retrospective*

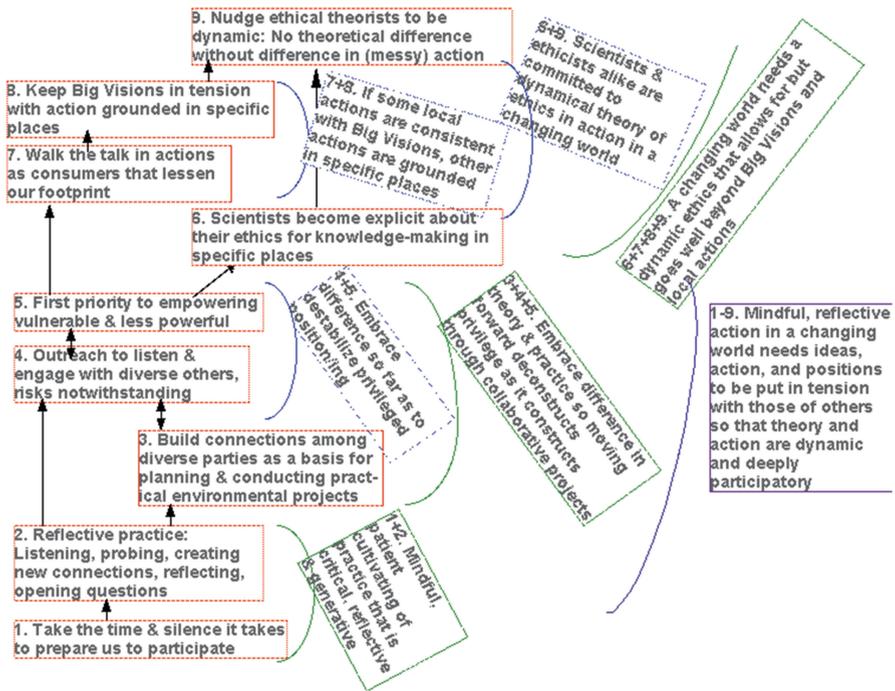
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- Future Ideal Retrospective activity (P2) to synthesize the between-session homework. (In brief, each participant imagined at some *future* time being part of a project that embodied an ethical framework for participatory processes. Looking back (*retrospective*) to explain to someone what contributed to making that *ideal* situation possible, three to five words answers were printed on Post-Its. After collecting and copying these for participants, the task was to find and name clusters of Post-Its. (Links to a description of the process and to the collated Post-Its are given in Taylor 2011.)
  - Closing circle (P4): “one thing you’re taking away from these sessions to keep developing.” (The audio linked to Taylor 2011 includes, among other things, mention of the value of freewriting, the need for being willing to participate, and the difficulty of being in the process without knowing the intended product.)
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The intended follow up to the last session of the discussion group was that each person would complete and share the Post-It syntheses then email exchanges might build on these. Because I had prior experience in—and a disposition for—the clustering and naming exercise, I readily generated clusters and grouped these into successively more inclusive clusters, which I shared and have subsequently depicted as Fig. 21.1 (and discuss in Sect. 21.3). However, I know of no other follow-up from the participants. In short, the group did not get to a place where we had developed “plans and practices... in which all the participants are invested.” (For description of a multi-stage workshop process for moving to such a result from an initial “Practical Vision,” see Stanfield 2002.)

Nevertheless, at least for me, the sessions affirmed that participatory processes can result in a “project that is richer, deeper, and has more dimensions than what you came in with. The more angles... that are brought out by the process, the more likely you are to create something you did not anticipate” (Taylor and Szteiter 2012, 149) (P3). It was by chewing on the clusters in Fig. 21.1 and tensions among them that I was moved to articulate the *ideals of engagement* outlined in Sect. 21.3. For those ideals to make sense to readers let me first share a reflection from just after the 2011 Conference, in which I asked what might have happened if ecological science rather than ethics had taken the lead.

## 21.2 From Dynamic Flux Ecology to Dynamic Flux Ethics

The scientists, philosophers, and interdisciplinary scholars gathered at the 2011 Conference shared a concern with environmental degradation. One model for stemming that degradation is that people need to have a different ethic about non-human nature to govern their actions, the assumption here being that a person’s ethics governs their actions, not vice versa. This model was evident in the repeated reference by



**Fig. 21.1** A schema for ethics of participatory processes linking ecology and social action that emerged from a Future Ideal Retrospective activity. The numbered items up the *left* are the names given by the author to clusters of Post-Its, which had been generated by participants responding to the Future Ideal Retrospective prompt (see Table 21.1 for explanation and Taylor 2011 for links to the original Post-Its). These clusters were arranged by the author and linked with *arrows* so as to convey that, if a lower item happens, that makes it more likely that ones above it happen. The clusters are then grouped, as indicated by the *curves* and *numbers*, into successively more inclusive clusters to the *right*. Interpretation of some of the clusters is given in due course in Sect. 21.3; the other clusters are open for readers to give their own meanings to

Conference speakers to Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, but also in the reference to animal rights. A variant of this model is to pay attention to religious views about nature, highlighting the ones that seem to be pro conservation or stewardship and downplaying the views that favor exploitation of resources. It is expected of religions that they promote some ethical framework; moreover, they have the authority and numbers to make their views count—to mobilize people into action.

A second model is that economics governs people’s actions, collectively as well as individually, so push for an economics based on a different set of values. Factor in especially the benefits of “services” provided by non-human nature—by ecosystems—rather than take them for granted, placing costs to the environment outside economic calculations. A hybrid of the two models, but in a form that

provides a counterweight to economics, is *biocultural conservation*, which centers on valuing the conservation jointly of habitats, cultural forms, and peoples threatened by environmental degradation (Rozzi 2013).

The two models and their variants do not stem from efforts to build theory about ecological complexity. (Observing this is not to discount the ecological research needed to measure ecosystem services or to characterize the habitat and co-inhabitants to be conserved.) The ecologist Steward Pickett spoke at the Conference about paradigms in ecology leading up to the present, concluding that values other than economic ones have to come into play to apply knowledge about ecology's dynamic fluxes (Pickett 2013). His conclusion brings us back, however, to the hybrid model above and to a focus on values, not ecological theory. *What might we see if we translated what is entailed in the non-equilibrium view into the realm of human actions?*

The non-equilibrium, dynamic flux view of ecology, as I would summarize it (Taylor and Haila 2001), is as follows: Since the 1980s ecologists became increasingly aware that situations may vary according to historical trajectories that have led to them; that particularities of place and connections among places matter; that time and place is a matter of scales that differ among co-occurring species; that variation among individuals can qualitatively alter the ecological process; that this variation is a result of ongoing differentiation occurring within populations—which are specifically located and inter-connected—and that apparent interactions among the species under study can be the indirect effects of other “hidden” species (i.e., having dynamics not explicitly considered in the study or models).

There is surely an analogous dynamism to the ways that people, in their contingent, changing social organizations, are able to direct and redirect their actions. We could, therefore, pay attention to the ways that situations—social organizations—may vary according to historical trajectories that have led to them; that particularities of place and connections among places matter; that time and place is a matter of scales that differ among co-occurring social groups and institutions; that variation among individuals can qualitatively alter the social and environmental process; that this variation is a result of ongoing differentiation occurring within populations—which are specifically located and inter-connected—and that interactions among the groups and institutions under study can be artifacts of the indirect effects of groups and institutions with dynamics not explicitly considered.

This picture of human action turns the values-centered models of ethics inside out. Values become a contingent snapshot of themes that *appear* to be directing an individual or group—themes that people may or may not make explicit, discuss, debate, and use to negotiate their actions. As an analogy, in ecology and environmental science, we get some guidance, but not very much, by pointing to the evolutionary imperative for organisms to survive and reproduce. Similarly, we should expect to learn a little, but not too much, from focusing on the ethical basis that is, or could be, *inside* the heads or hearts of people. Instead, we might replace values-centered ethics with a *dynamic flux ethics*. Yet what would that look like? And what could one do with it? The answer to the second question remains to be seen. The final section provides my answer to the first question.

### 21.3 From Engagement to Curiosity: Ideals to Inform an Ethics of Participatory Processes

There is, as yet, no dynamic flux ethics linking ecology and social action. In the space available it is possible, however, to identify five broad ideals that could inform such an ethics. The first ideal follows as a matter of necessity from the picture of dynamic flux; the other ideals flow each from the one before it.

On the presumption that the dynamic flux of ecological and social complexities cannot be well understood from an *outside* view (in which complexities are, say, reduced to a unifying metric such as energy, ascendancy, or ecosystem services), positions of *engagement* must be taken *within* the complexity (Taylor 2005, p. 203ff). Engagement denotes deliberate involvement in a situation in ways that presume that other people will also take an active role. As suggested by cluster 9 in Fig. 21.1, ethical propositions need to make a difference in the social complexities sketched in the Sect. 21.2. Moreover, if a values-centered ethic is advocated—say, animal rights, biocultural, or land ethic—it should be kept in tension with “action grounded in specific places” (cluster 8). Engagement has, in a sense, long been emphasized in Adaptive Environmental Management (Gunderson et al. 1995): research or knowledge production needs to be linked with planning for action and action itself in an ongoing process so that knowledge, plans, and action can be continually reassessed in response to developments—predicted and surprising alike.

On-going re-assessment means that engagement invites *participation* or collaboration. As mentioned above (see also Appendix 1), collaboration in environmental research allows multiple perspectives to be combined, and, in view of the problematic boundaries of ecological situations, for study to extend over time and span distance. It can also generate new perspectives, ensure durability of outcomes, and develop people’s capacities—including their capacity to collaborate (Taylor et al. 2011). We should note that the call for participation is sometimes a smokescreen for the powerful to maintain control (Peters 1996). What makes for *ethical* participation is indicated by the initial quote about “bringing into interaction... a wide range of social agents” (reflected in cluster 3 in Fig. 21.1). Moreover, as clusters 4 and 5 suggest: Give “first priority to empowering the vulnerable and less powerful” and undertake “outreach to listen and engage with diverse others, risks notwithstanding.”

Generating knowledge about dynamic fluxes and about the effects of people’s actions within those fluxes is only part of the rationale for engagement and participation. The objective of developing people’s capacities invites attention as well to the process, with a view, whatever the content or outcome, to *cultivating collaborators*. In what I have previously called flexible engagement: “researchers in any knowledge-making situation [should take up the challenge] of connecting quickly with others who are almost ready to foster—formally or otherwise—participatory processes and, through the experience such processes provide their participants, contribute to enhancing the capacity of others to do likewise” (Taylor 2005, p. 210). In this spirit, the placement of clusters 1 and 2 at the bottom left in Fig. 21.1 is meant to suggest that all the other aspects of a dynamic flux ethics

are enhanced by “Tak[ing] the time and silence it takes to prepare us to participate” through “listening, probing, creating new connections, reflecting [and] opening questions.”

The qualities of engagement, participation, and cultivating collaborators are illustrated by the case of community planning in a district in Northern Ontario included as Appendix 2. However, as the postscript to that case shows, the community’s capacities were stretched and its plans undermined by decisions made at a distance by a multinational employer. This experience points to the need for an additional quality to engagement, namely, that it cuts across and connects different strands, processes, and social realms. Such *transversality* of engagement means not only taking seriously the creativity and capacity-building that arises from well-facilitated participation among people who share a place or livelihood, but also incorporating knowledge-making of non-local or trans-local researchers—including knowledge about the dynamics that produce adverse trans-local decisions and about ways to try to mitigate their effects.

A corollary of transversality is that cultures or cultural forms are not foundational entities for understanding the history of a place or situation and its prospect for the future. Granted, it may sometimes be effective as a tactic to focus on biocultural conservation—just as invoking the Endangered Species Act in the United States provides a way to check environmentally unsound economic development (but see Sellers 1999 for some interesting history behind that tactic). Yet, as emphasized by the anthropologist Eric Wolf (1982), the cultural form to be conserved may be the contingent and perhaps transient outcome of connections among places and distant peoples. For example, as rubber began to be used in nineteenth century Europe, the Mundurucú deep in the Amazon changed from villages centered around male-headed, manioc-growing and hunting units, to numerous small female-centered households, “each linked separately to the trading post in a web of exchanges [of latex for commodities]” (Wolf 1982, pp. 17–18, 326ff). Such economically mediated changes may be just what a biocultural ethic seeks to resist—after all, the cultural shift for the Mundurucú was tied up with their growing indebtedness. Yet, given the long reach of commodity chains, such resistance cannot be focused on one social location. The ideal of transversality means finding ways in the Global North to be accountable for the effects that our consumption—as well as the economic production and other actions (e.g., military interventions) that support our consumption—have on people distant from us geographically, culturally, socioeconomically. This challenge of “walk[ing] the talk in actions as consumers that lessen our footprint” (cluster 7 in Fig. 21.1) increases even further if we add distant from us *in time*—in the future—to this list.

Additional corollaries of transversality stem from recognizing that when, as researchers or activists, we are faced with *complex* connectedness and dynamic flux, our sense of how to change and sustain a new orientation is often crystallized by *simple* themes, such as “Reduce CO<sub>2</sub> below 350 ppm,” “Maintain biodiversity as essential for human survival,” “Promote Earth Stewardship,” or “Facilitate participatory approaches.” A challenge, then, for a dynamic flux ethics is to acknowledge

the impact of simple themes without discounting the additional, more idiosyncratic knowledge researchers have about the complexity of their social context (Taylor 2004, 2005, p. 198). A complementary challenge is to “Keep Big Visions in tension with action grounded in specific places” (cluster 8 in Fig. 21.1). For example, when conservation biologists deeply value the species threatened by the clearing of a tropical rainforest, transversality of engagement would mean that they learn about the social and economic dynamics that embed the people who are clearing the forest as well as those that embed anyone—local or trans-local—who seeks to resist that destruction.

Neither Fig. 21.1 nor this chapter as a whole provides a concrete framework for or illustrations of the addition of transversality to the ideals of engagement, participation, and cultivating collaborators. Whether a dynamic flux ethics would lead to Earth Stewardship remains, therefore, an open question. My last ideal, then, concerns a sense of stewardship characterized not by firm positions or readily identified loyalties, but by mutual recognition among inquirers—among people trying to make sense of their own circumstances as they seek ways to change what has been given to them by dint of history, place, and the unfolding actions of others. In Raymond Williams’s novel *Loyalties*, the ending of which is quoted at the start of this chapter, an elderly character who was once a partisan fighting against Franco’s overthrow of the Spanish Republic but is now tending a forest plot for conservation, argues with a relative from the next generation, noting that the scientific career of the younger man has taken him away from the community of his birthplace. Political involvement, the older man contends, cannot be a simple matter of staying loyal to one’s roots. Given the “powerful forces” that shape social and environmental change, we can “in intelligence” grapple with them “by such means as we can find” and take a deliberate path of action, but “none of us, at any time, can know enough, can understand enough, to avoid getting much of it wrong” (Williams 1985, pp. 357–8). The final ideal, then, that I would associate with a dynamic flux ethics is *fostering curiosity*—embracing the questions opened up once we set out to put engagement, participation, cultivation of collaborators, and transversality into practice.

The word [curiosity] pleases me... it evokes "concern"; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervor to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential... I dream of a new age of curiosity. (Foucault, *The Masked Philosopher*, 1996)

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## Appendix 1: Why Emphasize Collaboration in Environmental Research?

(Drawn from Taylor et al. 2011)

### A. Sum of the Parts

#### *Combining multiple perspectives*

- When research is tied up with planning and management that involves meetings and networks of representatives of established and emerging stakeholder groups, research projects also need to integrate knowledge and questions from the different groups and kinds of research (Margerum 2008; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000).
- When researchers are concerned about social justice, they can shape their inquiries through on-going work with and empowerment of people whose lives stand to be most affected by some change in social policy or technological development, such as digging of deep wells for irrigation (Greenwood and Levin 1998).
- When the knowledge and research skills of more than one person/speciality are needed, multi-disciplinary research teams are established.
- When the labor of research, especially in data collection, is beyond any research group, amateurs—“citizen scientists”—can be sought as collaborators (Wikipedia n.d.; Barrow 2000).
- Workshops and other organized multi-person collaborative processes in environmental research constitute a self-conscious example of what sociologists of science and technology have called “heterogeneous engineering” (Law 1987, i.e., the mobilization of heterogeneous resources by diverse agents spanning different realms of social action) (Taylor 2005, p. 93ff).

#### *Extending over time*

- The nature of environmental complexity means that ongoing assessment (as against a one-time analysis) is needed, so an ongoing organization or group is formed to conduct the assessment, as recognized in the field of Adaptive Environmental Assessment and Management (Resilience Alliance n.d.; Gunderson et al. 1995).

#### *Spanning distance*

- Researchers in separate projects and disparate locations use the tools of eco-informatics to link their data into a larger picture (Halpern et al. 2008).

### B. Greater than the Sum of the Parts (i.e., outcomes over and above A.)

#### *Generating new perspectives*

- Knowledge and further research questions can be generated that the collaborators (individually or in sum) did not have when they came in (Olson and Eoyang 2001).

*Durable*

- Guided by skillful facilitators, collaborators can become invested in the plans, policy, and ongoing collaborations that emerge from the research (Stanfield 2002, p. 17ff).

*Developing capacities*

- Collaborators develop skills and dispositions for collaboration in various settings, as warranted by the rise of citizen participation and of new institutions of “civil society” (Burbidge 1997; Taylor 2005, p. 204ff).

## **Appendix 2: A Case of Participatory Community Planning in Northern Ontario**

(Drawn from Taylor 2005)

As described in Stanfield (2002), the workshops of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) elicit participation in a way that brings insights to the surface and ensures the full range of participants are invested in collaborating to bring the resulting plans or actions to fruition. Such investment was evident, for example, after a community-wide planning process in the West Nipissing region of Ontario, 300 km north of Toronto. In 1992, when the regional Economic Development Corporation (EDC) enlisted ICA to facilitate this process, industry closings had increased the traditionally high unemployment to crisis levels. The EDC wanted specific plans, but it also sought significant involvement from community residents. Twenty meetings with over 400 participants moved through the first three phases—vision, obstacles, and directions. The results were synthesized by a steering committee into common statements of the vision, challenges, and strategic directions. A day-long workshop attended by 150 community residents was then held to identify specific projects and action plans, and to engage various groups in carrying out projects relevant to them. A follow-up evaluation five years later found that it was not possible simply to check off plans that had been realized because the initial projects had spawned many others. Indeed, the EDC had been able to shift from the role of initiating projects to that of supporting them. It made more sense, therefore, to assemble the accomplishments under the headings listed in the original vision and strategy documents. Over 150 specific developments were cited, which demonstrated a stronger and more diversified economic base, and a diminished dependence on provincial and national government social welfare programs. What is especially noteworthy about this example is that the community came to see itself as responsible for these initiatives and developments, eclipsing the initial catalytic role of the EDC-ICA planning process. The EDC saw beyond their catalytic role and came to appreciate the importance of the emergent process and initiated a new round of facilitated community planning in 1999 (West Nipissing Economic Development Corporation 1993, 1999).

Postscript: In late 2002, a major employer in the West Nipissing region, Weyerhaeuser, closed its containerboard plant. A local newspaper article (Haddow 2003) quoted a Weyerhaeuser spokesperson: “[T]he decision to close the facility is not a reflection on the employees of Sturgeon Falls and their abilities and efforts... It was made for economic reasons beyond their control.” The spokesperson went on to explain that “the company’s preference would have been to keep all facilities running, but the market changes and current economic conditions forced their hand.” “If we as a company do not adapt, then we will not survive and none of our employees will have jobs.” The community sprang into action and threatened lawsuits, but the plant closure was not reversed.

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