Thursday 1 May 2008-ISRN National Meeting 2008
Discussion group A – Chair Jill Grant
What would a socially inclusive creativity led economic development strategy look like?

Summary overview:

We had a round table of more than 20 people from across the country, with a mix of case study leads and students, a member of the Research Advisory Committee, and some other participants. We began by discussing: What are the challenges of developing such a strategy? Katie reported that a CEO interviewed in London ON said that the words "socially inclusive, creativity and economic development" don't belong together in the same sentence. Others had heard some similar comments. Attitudes of business and economic development leaders may resist dealing with issues of social inclusion. Traditional economic development has not been willing to go there.

In Saskatoon those in the private sector and industry associations may not cross over into the participatory sector. Although government sees an important role for social inclusion, that may not be shared by those in industry.

At this point we noted that the experience might differ from community to community. Caroline suggested that in Ottawa government is committed to inclusion and using education and other programs to try to improve it. They recognize that continued exclusion will hurt industry: they need to build a work force that is competitive. Hence the perception of self interest is that inclusion will help the city.

Juan-Luis said that in Montreal local economic development corporations are generating bottom up governance. Government recognizes that to attract talent the city needs to be secure and promote social cohesion. Community based local economic development is part of that strategy.

At this point we discussed how to define inclusion and exclusion. We agreed that it was not static, but rather a process. It occurs at multiple scales (from the very local to the international). It involves issues of access to education, to rights, and to other things in society. It involves issues of social networks that help people to be included, and of opportunities for people to build new networks that connect them in society. Juan-Luis mentioned Parole d'exclus – voice of the excluded – as an example of a strategy to give voice to those who can't participate.

We noted the fuzziness of what 'inclusive' may mean. If our regions are recruiting skilled immigrants and providing them with vary focussed training for the work force, is that a social welfare program or an economic development strategy? In some cases we need to dig underneath what is described as promoting inclusion to see what the underlying motives are and identify who benefits.

We noted that in many cases the immigrant population is in danger of being commodified: brought in to rescue a region but then not fully integrated or welcomed. In some regions the "CFA" [come from away] problem prevents people from feeling included by long term residents.

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Alberta has a net immigration in this period of boom and is targeting skilled workers. But diversity issues seem quite separated from that phenomenon. It isn't obvious in that situation that business is behind social inclusion: competing interests are at work.

At this point we had an interesting discussion about discourse: what kinds of stories people tell about inclusion and exclusion. We wondered what institutional incentives exist in varying communities to include different discourses about the issues. Someone noted that non profit groups with similar goals in a given community often know relatively little about what others are doing and see themselves as on their own. The potential for collaboration to achieve similar ends is undermined because their stories portray them as heroic individualists.

The study of Kingston reveals a culture of whiteness: institutionalized racism. Betsy raised questions around the discourse of the creative class and suggested that the literature privileges the "cosmopolitan class": city dwellers over the rural, etc. It does not deal with issues of gender adequately. It may encourage the successful to further their needs while ignoring social development issues. Underinvestment in public education, libraries, recreating, public housing, transit and other basic public infrastructure may be lagging while investments in flashy museums gets support from the cosmopolitan class. The two worlds clash in Kingston because it has a large working class population (associated with the prisons etc) as well as an intellectual class. Those who what to see the city develop may want to retain its university grads and would thus displace lower class residents.

These observations highlight the significance of class in the discourse. The 'creative class' is a story of class displacement. The commodification of immigrants and of talent privileges some over others. It involves a global pipeline that may in some cities go along with local disengagement. That is, if talented folks are coming from somewhere else, are they really willing to engage with the local community? In some of the case communities we noted that does seem to happen: talent may see the local community as "too parochial" and not bother to get involved. (eg in Kingston) In other places, though, the "come from aways" may become the driving force in development activities: eg, this seems to happen in Halifax where those engaged in development practice and in working for agencies promoting inclusion often have come from somewhere else. Ottawa is fighting a history that has newcomers defining the city as "boring" and is now trying to re-label itself as "interesting". Different stories are told in these different places about what it means to "integrate" into the community, what the responsibility of the newcomer is, and what the nature of the place is. We agreed that there could be some productive work in pursuing the kinds of stories told about cities and the links they make (or don't make) between inclusivity, creativity and development.

We observed that different actors are involved in economic development in different places. In Montreal, for instance, the unions are involved quite extensively. We might explore how they intervene with development funds to support social and community groups. What kind of influence do they have on entrepreneurship? We might look in our case studies for good examples of "success stories" to tell others.

We discussed Richard Florida's ideas and noted that he does not promote social inclusion. He acknowledges that the focus on retaining talent is not an inclusive strategy: it may entail inequality. Our challenge then is that the basic theory that underlies the model of the creative city within which we are working is not inherently socially inclusive. It may inadvertently promote institutional incentives to entrench and enhance inequality. We will need to move the theory forward to be more inclusive.

Someone noted that new immigrants are talented but may not be fully integrated socially and economically. Immigrants often have strong capital in social networks that support them, but they may be economically excluded (by issues like credentials being challenged by professional organizations [pre-existing social networks].) Later Richard advised that in Vancouver respondents resisted the idea of 'integration'. This may suggest that our case studies indicate divergent understandings of what social inclusion can and should mean in local context.

This led us to a discussion of what we might mean by social inclusion. Is it about economic integration, social networks, representation in decision making, participation in decision making? Is it about awareness on the part of those already "in" or about bringing the excluded in? Betsy indicated that she had written a paper about talent that set out a three point way of thinking about inclusion: 1. decide to include, 2. accommodate to include, 3. celebrate the difference.

We discussed the trend to commodify difference (through festivals, ethnic dining, etc) and the self-congratulatory liberal notion of tolerance. We agreed we needed to go farther to ensure inclusion to provide concrete representations of options. At the local level we can ask, what are the representational structures that engage those who may be excluded? Who is at the table? What can those at the table do? Can the group affect policy?

We recognized that some of the most socially cohesive groups are homogeneous. We also noted that the large cities are quite multi-cultural, with large groups, and with a growing Aboriginal population that is often forgotten or under-served. Many points of difference can be exclusionary: class, gender, race, immigrant status. Thus exclusion can be multidimensional and challenging to deal with.

The Bouchard Taylor Commission on reasonable accommodation recently held in Quebec identified the challenges of dealing with inclusion. Inclusion may mean trying to accommodate difference and also may mean giving people the opportunity to speak out against accommodating difference. Not everyone wants to be inclusive.

In the project we are looking to see what is going on in each community and to understand what definition each community gives to being inclusive and innovative. We are trying to identify which groups have the power to define inclusion and what the minority views are. We might situate the study within a national architecture of power and economy, and a history of the redistribution of wealth. The amalgamation of Gatineau in Quebec was offered as an example of an effort to redistribute wealth while creating a more competitive region. We can learn from past successes in dealing with contemporary challenges.

People who are creative get together and look for creative solutions. Who are the social entrepreneurs in the communities we are studying? How do we scale their successes up? Are the knowledge economy workers engaging in social entrepreneurship? Should we engage in a less class oriented discussion?

Juan-Luis suggested that we go away from talking about a creative economy and focus on creative community. The goal might be to integrate all people into creative processes. In Montreal the focus of local economic development is on helping high school drop outs, the unemployed, and poor elderly get integrated into the economy and community by giving them skills and opportunities. There the issue is generally not immigrants.

This led to a discussion about who is or may be excluded: eg, single parents, unemployed, poor elderly, Aboriginal, rural, etc. At that point Allison noted that our discussion was still pre-theoretical and normative.

Thomas indicated that his study of musicians in Montreal indicated that the low cost of living and education there allowed musicians to start their careers with relatively few resources. Given the right social conditions, places can support and enhance creativity.

At this point we discussed international inequities and some contradictions inherent within economic development. On the one hand the rise in commodity prices is good for parts of Canada that produce wheat or oil. On the other hand, a billion people in the world are hungry and economically excluded. What is our responsibility to the world? Can we be thinking creatively about this? What is our theoretical model of the competitive city and does it entail that there are winners and losers? Right now we see massive social exclusion on a global scale even where there may be inclusion at a local scale. Does attracting and retaining immigrants in Canada undermine opportunities of other parts of the world to have the services of the people we attract? How do we deal with these difficult questions of the wider geographies of injustice while ensuring social inclusion and economic development at home? Should we be considering how to generate internally based creative economies [import substitution]?

We considered the temporal implications of the model within which we are working. There seems to be an urgency to make things happen 'now', even if that may involve displacing workers or residents. What can we do to integrate and include displaced industrial workers who are unlikely to find a place in the creative economy?

We came again to the question of "what is success"? we don't want to increase education and income only to enhance social polarization. We recognize that immigrants to Canada can still benefit the communities they have left by providing remittances. Who wins and who loses is important to understand in any kind of development strategy. We should be trying to identify the alternatives and the trade-offs that may be made in the communities we are studying.

At that point Susan noted that we were having "a bit of a subversive discussion". We might be suggesting that the latest development strategy has replaced chasing smokestacks with chasing labour. It would be good if our case studies could find examples of a "creative economy plus" model that simultaneously enhances the economy

while engaging and including those who are excluded in many places. What are the generative arguments we can make> what are the options and paths that we are seeing that lead to better outcomes? Is there a continuum of development strategies that go from more to less inclusive? (Susan suggested that a book titled 'The contemporary age of capitalism' might make good reading.)

We noted that governments in many of the communities we are studying seem interested in socially inclusive economic development but they need advice on what it means and how to make it work. We will also need to be clear about how it may link to creativity and innovation: we can be watching for this in our case studies.

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In my report to the plenary session I summarized the discussion around these points:
- We compared diverse experiences in the communities we are studying, and dealt with questions of theory and of practice.
- We identified some significant challenges to developing a socially inclusive creativity led economic development strategy. We noted that although government seems supportive of the concept the attitude of those in charge of economic development strategies is less positive.
- We discussed 'what is inclusion?'. We raised questions of access (to skills, to rights), connection to social and professional networks, issues of voice and representation, and questions of power.
- We dealt with questions of scale: local, regional, global. What is the scale at which we should be worrying about social exclusion and inclusion? We recognized the challenge that some of our communities benefit from situations that may disadvantage folks in other parts of the world. For instance, the rise in agricultural prices benefits western cities but contribute to hunger in other places.
- Unspoken questions of neo-liberalism inevitably raise their head when we begin to talk about social inclusion.
- Different places face different issues and responses. While we have already found some success stories regarding inclusion, we haven't found enough yet.
- We flagged some concerns about the way in which creative city strategies market or commodify difference. We need to find ways for meaningful social inclusion and social opportunity in these strategies.
- We noted that the creative class is a cosmopolitan class. We must ensure that development strategies avoid displacement. We can be identifying who wins and who loses in the communities we are studying.

Summary notes by Jill Grant