

STRENGTHENING  
RURAL  
CANADA



RENFORCER LES  
COMMUNAUTÉS  
RURALES DU CANADA

*Our people. Our communities. Our future.*

# **STRENGTHENING RURAL CANADA:** Summary of Rural British Columbia Community Visits

Prepared for the Strengthening Rural Canada initiative by Decoda Literacy Solutions

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Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program

Canada 

ROADMAP FOR CANADA'S OFFICIAL  
LANGUAGES 2013-2018

EDUCATION  
IMMIGRATION  
COMMUNITIES

# INTRODUCTION

**Strengthening Rural Canada-Renforcer les communautés rurales du Canada** is a comprehensive study on the human and social capital dimensions of rural, small town and remote communities in Canada. Using the latest Census and National Household Survey (NHS) data, the initiative is examining the socio, cultural, economic and organizational attributes of the community and population of 28 communities in select provinces across Canada (Ontario, British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador).

## *Funders/Partners*

Strengthening Rural Canada is funded by the Government of Canada's Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program and in part by the Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages 2013-18: Education, Immigration and Communities. Partners on the project include Essential Skills Ontario, Decoda Literacy Solutions, Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador, the Saskatchewan Literacy Network and Réseau pour le développement de l'alphabétisme et des compétences (RESDAC).

## *How Communities Were Selected*

Due to the diversity of rural areas, a common set of criteria was developed across all provinces to select a diverse group of communities for the purpose of this initiative. The criteria examined the following factors: population size, demographics and degree of rurality. For more detailed information please visit [www.strengtheningruralcanada.ca/the-initiative/selecting-communities/](http://www.strengtheningruralcanada.ca/the-initiative/selecting-communities/)

## *British Columbia communities selected:*

- Hope
- Gold River
- Salmo
- Tumbler Ridge
- Chetwynd

## *Community Visits*

Over the past seven months, Decoda Literacy Solutions and Essential Skills Ontario visited five rural and small communities across B.C. During our visits we interviewed a wide range of individuals: mayors, municipal representatives, economic development officers, service club members, employers, Chamber of Commerce directors, employment services providers, community service organization representatives, literacy coordinators, post-secondary institutions, school districts, libraries and local residents. Through these visits we were able to gather the information necessary to paint a picture of each community, including its strengths, opportunities and challenges. Each person we met with welcomed us into their community and provided insights we would not have been able to gather without their help.

## **BRIEF HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF RURAL BRITISH COLUMBIA COMMUNITIES**

Each rural community in B.C. is inherently unique, depending on the history of development, the culture of the community, the location and climate, and the basis for industrial growth. There are, however, some common factors that play a large role in shaping communities:

- The stability and diversity of industry. Single resource industry communities have a more difficult time when there is a downturn in markets or depletion of the resource.
- The increasing median age of the citizens. Communities that are made up largely of seniors or that attract retirees have more difficulty sustaining small businesses. Communities that are attracting young families often have more disposable income and opportunities.
- Seasonal tourism, which increases the size of the population of those communities that are located in areas of interest to tourists. Local services such as police and hospital may not be sufficient for the influx of people. Conversely, there may be more opportunity for economic growth in tourism.
- Seasonal or camp-type employment, which increases the numbers of people – particularly men – in a community, but not necessarily the property tax base. Conversely, home communities are drained of human resources when people leave to work in northern resource industries for extended periods of time.
- Emerging ‘bedroom’ communities that are close to larger urban centres and/or are located close to major transit connections.
- Seasonal small businesses which must generate their bulk of revenue in a few months of service.
- Historic and generational poverty. These may include aboriginal, migrant and/or immigrant populations.

For the most part in British Columbia, the story of rural and small town communities is typical of the broader patterns of urban growth, resource industry boom and bust cycles, and the tension between change and tradition. Some communities have lost major industries and are struggling, while others are on the verge of significant growth that will have its own management issues. Some have become accustomed to cyclical change and have learned to manage it. Some are looking for ways to increase economic stability. Some want to attract new and younger families and create a climate for small business success.

In our community visits, many people talked about strategies to revitalize their towns. They want their communities to thrive and be successful. They want to do well there. Community development is a complex process that occurs over years and is dependent on a variety of factors. Solutions for community issues have to take into account the very specific situations and unique human potential of each community. Though communities can learn from each other and share innovative ideas, a vision and strategy suited to each community’s needs, resources, history and location makes sense in terms of growth and management.

## COMMON THEMES AND LEARNINGS

Most rural communities are not large enough to make long term or in depth post-secondary education viable, therefore young people must leave their communities to take training after high school. In some communities, youth have to leave for high school. Sometimes these youth return to their home communities, but more often they do not. Furthermore, in most of the communities we visited, there were few immigrants choosing to reside in rural areas - which could possibly offset the effects of youth migration.

There were some other issues that were expressed by community members, including:

- Sustaining a large enough tax base to keep up with providing existing services and infrastructure costs
- Resistance to change, particularly to creating new industry
- Declining school enrolments are leading to school closures, which means long transit times for children and the loss of the use of major community facilities. Small class sizes have some benefits in terms of the amount of attention that children get, but extra-curricular activities can be difficult.
- Lack of technology and internet services. Though broadband services are much better than a few years ago, there are still pockets of very poor or slow service.
- Lack of activities for youth and/or young adults due in large part to low numbers of this age group.
- High levels of substance abuse
- Lack of health care
- Minimal public transit services. This is most problematic for seniors and people who need to get to work or access social services, but cannot afford a car.
- Loss of government services and jobs in rural areas as a result of downsizing and centralization.

Other learnings that occurred through our visits and interviews:

- Communities can be revitalized: small actions and initiatives can have big impacts
- Human capital is important for rural communities: it is critical to have people with the skills, ideas and experience to come up with creative solutions to solve and address local issues
- Communities can create larger impacts if they work with neighbouring communities in their regions
- Newcomers and/or people who have left the community and come back can be crucial assets for communities. They can bring different skills, have different perspectives about the community, and can often bring about change

## **RURAL SUCCESS STORY**

Advantage Hope is working with other agencies and members of the community of Hope to change the perception about the community – from a stop on the highway to a vibrant place to visit and live. Hope has considerable potential as a tourist destination from an interesting history in the fur trade and gold rush to over 70 kilometres of hiking trails and breathtaking scenery. The group has led the community through a branding exercise that has the potential to change the image of Hope and “put it on the map” as more than just a truck stop.

## **POSSIBLE KEY CONSIDERATIONS MOVING FORWARD**

Our community visits and interviews align with the observations and issues from numerous reports about rural challenges in B.C. and Canada. Key considerations to support rural communities include:

- Adopt holistic approaches to rural revitalization that includes the integration of social, environmental and economic objectives and strategies.
- Create integrated plans that are regionally and specifically appropriate. One size does not fill all.
- Tie in human capital strategies to economic development plans. Include current education providers in the development of these plans.
- Create viable education and training opportunities for youth and adults that includes training for older adults with low levels of educational and training, small business training and apprenticeship training.
- High speed internet is critically important for the most isolated communities in order to help retain youth and attract new businesses.
- Create initiatives to attract new immigrants to rural and more isolated communities.

To read the profiles of the rural British Columbia communities we visited, please visit:

[www.strengtheningruralcanada.ca/communities/british-columbia/](http://www.strengtheningruralcanada.ca/communities/british-columbia/)