

Unlikely Allies

Cross-Sector Partnerships for Sustainable Development

GLYNN DAVIS (Manager, Community Engagement and Social Responsibility, Trident): "So that's what we took a look at, getting gas but at the same time understanding people's issues. The corporate culture evolved right from the beginning to support that, so it was possible for a lot of the employees to accept that this was the way we do things."

Trident Exploration and Fort Assiniboine

Not Your Average Christmas Basket

Trident Exploration Corporation, founded in 2000, has its headquarters in Calgary, Alberta. The company's main focus is natural gas exploration and development, largely from coalbed methane. Trident is mainly interested in the Western Canadian Sedimentary Basin, which has a significant concentration of high gas content coal. Many rural communities within the region are identified as key stakeholders, and are engaged through the company's Community Engagement and Social Responsibility division.

BACKGROUND

Trident has deliberately crafted a corporate culture that supports commitment to sustainable community development. Its commitment is driven by the worldview of two of the senior founders of Trident who worked overseas in the oil and gas industry. While there, these two individuals developed an appreciation of the potential negative impacts that resource development can have on host communities, as well as ways these impacts could be managed or mitigated. Upon returning to Canada, they applied this insight when creating Trident's particular approach to community development.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)

The ABCD model focuses on identifying and supporting the skills that exist within a given community to realize a shared vision of development.¹ In this way it emphasizes strengths, rather than weaknesses, and focuses on the active participation of community members to create solutions that build upon those resources locally available. Trident's ABCD model is a three-step process: map assets, create a shared vision and mobilize local assets in support of the vision. As part of the process, community members work closely with Trident employees to ensure the projects remain grounded in the local reality and are sustainable beyond Trident's projected stay in the community.

ABCD in Action: The Christmas Basket Program

Trident's Christmas Basket Program provides an example of this community development philosophy in action. During the holiday season companies regularly send their business partners and contacts baskets that typically include premium wines, chocolates and even ski passes or tickets to upcoming concerts. Led by Dr. Glynn Davis, Trident's Community



Students from Morrin school put baskets together for Trident's Christmas Basket Program.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TRIDENT EXPLORATION CORPORATION

¹ ABCD is the approach developed and championed by John McKnight and John Kretzmann of Northwestern University. More information on their work and on ABCD is available through the ABCD Institute at Northwestern (www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html).



LOIS ROBINSON (Artisan): "It's a great opportunity for me to advertise my wares... They pay me for my product and I also get to advertise, so you really can't get a better deal."



Trident's Christmas Basket Program is an example of the Asset Based Community Development philosophy in action.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TRIDENT EXPLORATION CORPORATION

Engagement and Social Responsibility Manager, the company decided that a creative approach to its Christmas baskets could help to serve both needs of community development and holiday corporate giving.

Program Origins and How It Works

When Trident began to develop its interests in the central Alberta region, Davis' team began a community consultation process to engage stakeholders in the creation of an ABCD project. As a result of these consultations in the Fort Assiniboine area, Trident knew that there was a shared desire within the community to create educational and employment opportunities for youth while supporting local economic development. Davis and his team wondered, what if Trident engaged Fort Assiniboine high school students to put together its Christmas

baskets, and these baskets were made up exclusively of locally sourced artisan goods? The idea for the Christmas Basket project was born.

GLYNN DAVIS (Manager, Community Engagement and Social Responsibility, Trident): "Within oil and gas there is this notion that engineering and earth sciences have got that rigour, but when you come to the social sciences its more of a pray and spray approach.... A lot of companies do take an initiative, and if it's a good one and it works they aren't entirely clear why it worked.... If it doesn't work, they can't really pull it apart to understand the dynamics."

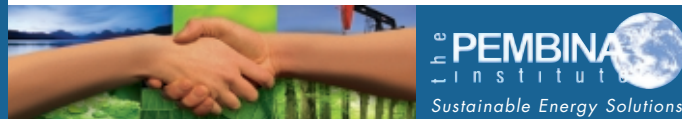
Trident then approached the principal at the Fort Assiniboine high school to propose the program and identify potential champions within the school. With buy-in secured, Trident used the community farmer's markets, an asset identified during the community mapping activity, to recruit local artisans to provide items for the gift baskets. Trident also identified the existing entrepreneurship program at Fort Assiniboine public school, and in subsequent years at Morrin School, as a platform upon which to provide a hands-on experience for local youth in project development.

Following the contact with Fort Assiniboine, a high school entrepreneurship program curriculum was developed by University of Calgary education students interning with Trident. The education program was then delivered in conjunction with local teachers as part of the existing entrepreneurship class at the high school. The high school students learned project management, planning and budgeting within the context of the Christmas Basket Program. They established costs and pricing, and designed the baskets. Finally, students were provided with the materials needed to assemble a total of 100 baskets, putting to use all the entrepreneurship skills they had been learning in class.

BENEFITS

The program has benefited both internal and external stakeholders. Because of the very positive feedback it has received from the gift basket recipients, Trident has been able to promote itself as a company that practices effective sustainable community development, and one that consistently considers how it can create opportunities for its communities. Local artisans are able to promote their

KYLA FISHER (*Liaison Lead, Community Engagement and Social Responsibility, Trident*): “The effort is up front, but once you get to know who’s doing what, and once the program is designed to the extent that now the school is taking the program on, and the students are identifying the people, there’s less human resource time.... [The Christmas Basket Program is] equivalent to walking to the store and ordering wine like everyone else.”



products to new markets without having to travel or spend money on marketing and transportation, and are given incentive to continue their artisan trades. The schools that have been involved in the program have been able to provide their students with an experiential opportunity that develops entrepreneurship and project management skills. As well, by offering these extra course credits, the schools have been able to increase their provincial funding.

REASONS FOR SUCCESS

A number of unique characteristics have enabled Trident to successfully develop the Christmas Basket Program with its Fort Assiniboine partners. First, senior leadership provides Trident’s community outreach department with almost four times the level of funding found in companies of similar size. The development of a long-term, complex and context-sensitive program like this requires significant time commitment, which in turn requires a significant financial investment.

The Trident staff that engages with the local community are a second important characteristic that makes this program successful. Community members are willing to work with the company through this more complex relationship because they trust the individuals who are consulting and implementing the Christmas Basket Program. This trust is built through the consistent presence of these individuals in the community, and the corporate willingness to engage in dialogue and to go above and beyond regulations in other areas, such as those dealing with the noise level of its pumps.

A third unique characteristic of Trident is that, unlike most other companies, it uses a community development approach grounded in development theory and continuous improvement. ABCD provides a process for Trident to evaluate the success of its community engagement, recognize the drivers and enablers of successful projects, and replicate these successes throughout their development programs.

CHALLENGES

Trident’s approach to community development, and to the Christmas Basket Program itself, is not without risks and challenges. Complex engagement of any kind means that partners are more vulnerable to each other, reputation and resources are more tightly meshed and responsibility is shared. This means that as the program develops, and responsibility for the production of the baskets is given to the community, further elaboration of goals and outcomes is required. Such elaboration is now contained in a Memorandum of Understanding, which clarifies the roles and responsibilities of each partner.

Because the ABCD approach places a significant emphasis on the importance of context and local knowledge, the programs developed through this process cannot be easily reproduced. The idea of creating a model that can simply be replicated across all communities is impossible; such models require consistent investments of human and financial resources. This means there will always be an apparently disproportionate input of these resources to develop and implement this kind of approach to community development.



DR. DON SCHIELKE (past Principal, Morrin School): "It was the quality of the people Trident sent, such good quality people. They honestly wanted to help and I thought it was just great, really great. Certainly we weren't getting help from other sources."



Trident reps Sue Wills and Kyla Fisher celebrate "wrapping up" the first Christmas Basket Project.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TRIDENT EXPLORATION CORPORATION

The Multiplier Effect

Davis thinks that Trident's approach to community and stakeholder engagement has had a significant effect on other companies in the sector. He points to the change in terminology, such the vocabulary surrounding community accountability and consultation, as a direct consequence of Trident's approach. He has also noticed a

dramatic increase in the commitment to public education in the coalbed methane field since Trident began its programs. Davis believes that Trident was the first coalbed methane company to make public education a non-negotiable part of project development, and that it is now a common practice among the majority of coalbed methane companies.

Within the oil and gas sector, Trident expects that other companies may adopt a modified version of the ABCD approach. While it is unlikely that other organizations will be able to adopt the

entire model, elements may be successfully adopted without complete buy-in to the philosophy behind the

process. In either case, by creating new norms against which other resource companies are measured, Trident hopes to influence the way energy sector companies engage the communities on which they depend to operate.

In 2007, the program will be run out of the local youth centre and will be associated with Junior Achievement, a non-profit entrepreneurial education program. This format will allow greater flexibility than previously, giving students from different schools the opportunity to participate while continuing to earn credit hours and experience, as well as monies for their schools.

The relationship between Trident and the community is strong. Even those who were not directly involved in the program have offered to help in subsequent years and to produce products or provide other means of supporting the program.

Now in its fourth year the program has evolved to include more local artisans, a well-developed curriculum and a thoroughly documented process. This allows new Trident employees to be quickly brought up to speed on project procedures. While the initial investment of human resources was significant, the program now requires much less effort on Trident's part because the community is able to manage it and produce the baskets nearly independently. The result is a sustainable source of community-produced gift baskets that cost Trident the same price as traditional gifts but are of a much higher value.

GLYNN DAVIS (Manager, Community Engagement and Social Responsibility, Trident): "Companies won't want to jump whole hog into our approach, but what will slowly happen is they'll end up designating someone to do this, or it will be the external construct against which things are projected.... What has been the biggest affirmation is that it has become fairly widely adopted, it's become much more the norm."