How Mid-sized Cities Innovate

June 17, 2003 – Innovative cities don't just happen, they are fostered.

It has become commonplace to call cities the "drivers of the new economy". But to play that role they need the environment and institutional capacity for innovation. How to bring this about is a pressing concern for policy-makers.

A new publication from CPRN addresses that concern. In ***Cities and Communities that Work: Innovative Practices, Enabling Policies***, Neil Bradford, a CPRN Family Network Research Associate and Huron University College political scientist, reviews the literature, examines a number of case studies here and abroad, and draws conclusions.

"The innovation we are talking about here goes beyond the introduction of new products to the market by firms," says Bradford. "It involves organizational creativity and the capacity to engage diverse actors in an inclusive, collaborative venture."

Bradford calls communities that display this kind of innovation, *learning communities*, because they provide the institutional, organizational and attitudinal context for improving their economies and the living standards of their residents.

The literature review uncovers seven "building blocks" in successful community-based innovation:

- The emergence of local champions
- The formation of institutional intermediaries
- A commitment to equitable participation
- A civic culture of creativity
- The provision of financial and technical resources
- Robust accountability mechanisms
- The development of indicators to benchmark progress

"Finding all seven of these in any city or community isn't assured," says Bradford. "It requires a level of maturity and the dynamic interplay of three forms of social learning: civic, administrative and policy."

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The paper presents 11 case studies of mid-sized cities and smaller communities here and abroad recognized for their creative response to today's challenges. The cases include rural or remote communities (e.g., Kelowna, B.C., North Jutland, Denmark), older industrial centres (e.g., Halifax, N.S., Dublin, Ireland), and geographically dispersed regions seeking to build knowledge-intensive clusters (e.g., Saskatoon, Sask., Portland, Oregon). The paper highlights their commonalities and key differences.

What they share, above all, is an effort to build from within – to grow local assets and exploit local advantages. The dynamics of innovation are also the same, combining bottom-up strategies with top-down support from higher levels of government. Each of the national systems, however, creates its own context for local initiatives – enabling or constraining them.

"In Canada, for example," says Bradford, "federal and provincial governments have not fully appreciated the interdependence of economic and social investments in building strong communities."

"If community-based innovation is to be sustainable then all levels of government have a role to play based on what they do best."

Bradford calls this *multi-level governance*, with each government active in areas where it has a "comparative advantage". Municipalities convene the actors for partnerships, undertake land use and development planning, engage other local authorities, like school boards, band councils and social service agencies, secure upper level support and ensure it fits with local conditions. Senior level governments supply resources to local actors for building infrastructure, help transfer best practices and provide the financial and regulatory tools to ensure equity.

"We see a number of promising initiatives of this kind across the country today, ranging from urban development agreements to strategies to combat homelessness," Bradford says. "They deserve careful study and further policy support."

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