

PART ONE OF A FOUR-PART SERIES ON SUSTAINABILITY: COMMUNITIES • TECHNOLOGIES • BUSINESS • POPULATIONS

Sustainable communities

With a host of changing social and economic dynamics profoundly affecting the ways people and communities relate to one another, experts concerned with sustainability are exploring ways to achieve the long-term viability of the world's urban and rural neighbourhoods.

The United Nations estimates that for the first time in human history more than half of the world's population now lives in urban areas. That fact, says David Graham, provost and vice-president, Academic, at Montreal's Concordia University, underlines the urgency of developing new ways for people to relate to one another – ways that take into account the increasing size, complexity and diversity of the cities in which most of us now live.

Work now underway at Concordia is helping break new ground in defining how communities of all sorts and sizes function and interconnect in new and sustainable ways.

While often used to describe "green" or environmentally sound practices, sustainability is more than that, says Dr. Graham. "It's about creating processes that can be maintained without having an adverse impact on the future."

That concept can be applied to just about any field, from the economy to the environment.

And that is just what Concordia is doing – starting with its work on sustainable communities, which Dr. Graham says are at the core of any sustainable lifestyle.

Take for example the worldwide issue of urban growth.

As cities grow, says Dr. Graham, they become increasingly difficult to live in because social cohesion diminishes and diversity increases. And that, he says, can lead to more adversarial relations. "Sustainability is about abating that," says Dr. Graham.

Concordia's University of the Streets Café initiative is making a unique contribution in this regard. This innovative program involves moderated, public conversations held in cafés and other locations around Montreal. The purpose: to foster dialogue and build social cohesion through constructive debate about contentious issues.

"We've held about 45 of these every year since 2003," said Lance Evoy, director of Concordia's Institute for Com-



The sustainability of urban centres is challenged, in part, by the complexities arising as more people of diverse backgrounds live among one another in densely populated cities. Concordia's University of the Streets Café initiative, pictured above, is helping address this issue by fostering open dialogue and communication through moderated, public conversations held in locations around Montreal. This effort is just one example of Concordia's work to advance understanding and education related to the sustainability of urban and rural communities. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

munity Development, which itself is a division of the School of Extended Learning.

Mr. Evoy said one of the advantages of holding moderated conversations is they bring together people of diverse backgrounds who might not otherwise cross paths.

In such a process the participants gain a deeper awareness of issues being explored that helps them to influence what can change, what can be improved, rather than simply accepting what is already in place.

"People tell me, 'I've never been to a public event with a group that's so diverse,'" he said, adding he's watched as those cafés "light a fuse" of excited discussion about an issue – for example, how to celebrate diversity instead of fear it. "People tell us this is

exactly the type of thing a university should be doing. If we're going to talk about sustainable communities, we have to break down silos."

Fostering sustainable communities isn't an issue limited to promoting understanding among diverse people living in cities, however. It also speaks to the need to encourage the interrelated economic well-being of all communities – large and small, rural and urban.

Too often, for example, small communities are threatened by resource depletion. In Canada, this is well illustrated by the impacts of the declining cod fishery in the Atlantic region and the challenges facing the forestry sector in rural Quebec and B.C. In developing nations, rural areas are suffering as populations migrate

to urban centres in search of employment and opportunity.

The challenge is that to achieve sustainability, says Professor Bill Reimer, head of The New Rural Economy Project, cities need the surrounding countryside as a source of raw materials, food and natural amenities. Conversely, rural areas need the markets cities provide.

To help address this issue, The New Rural Economy Project – a multi-year, cross-Canada research project headquartered at Concordia and involving more than a dozen universities – aims to find ways of increasing the viability and sustainability of rural communities, whether they are threatened by a flood of new residents or suffering because of the departure of industry.

Prof. Reimer says the proj-

ect is studying 32 small communities across the country with a view to building their capacity to handle change. Equally important, he says, this initiative is creating a body of research on rural issues, and making that information available to people in rural areas.

It is important for people in rural communities to have champions, says Prof. Reimer, adding that it's not about telling them what to do, but about working collaboratively with them so they can move forward. The approach is gaining traction. According to Prof. Reimer, the initiative has attracted attention from Japan to South America.

Concordia's John Molson School of Business (JMSB) is also helping drive community sustainability, in part through a new outreach component of

its MBA program. Through this effort, MBA students will expand their work with business organizations at home and abroad to improve the economic prospects and welfare of communities.

JMSB lecturer Janis Riven says in developing countries, for example, dynamic but untrained entrepreneurs often just need one small piece of the puzzle to make their ventures work. "They start these wonderful projects that flounder – and they don't know why," says Ms. Riven, explaining that Concordia MBA students help local entrepreneurs by bringing the know-how that will put local business people back on their feet. "It's usually just simple nuts and bolts stuff like creating an accounting system, or setting up a website that allows them to do proper marketing and fundraising."

Those changes, she says, give the businesses – and the communities they support – a better chance at survival.

Louise Dandurand, Concordia's vice-president, Research and Graduate Studies, says, "Sustainability is about rethinking our relations with one another, our social structures, our relationship with nature, as well as human relations and the way we develop public policies."

For their parts, Concordia students and faculty members have their ears to the ground, says Dr. Dandurand, and are working together to bring about new sustainability initiatives. "That ability to work together is part of what sustainable communities are all about," she says.

With nearly 40,000 students, Concordia is one of Canada's largest universities. Founded in 1974 as a result of a merger between Sir George Williams University and Loyola College, Concordia has developed leadership in fields ranging from business and engineering to the sciences, humanities and the fine arts. Concordia is now combining these strengths to advance research and education in the complex arena of social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Case study

Innovative caterer uses cuisine to connect community

Montreal's Santropol Roulant is the perfect example of sustainable practices at work. As Quebec's largest independent meals-on-wheels organization, Santropol Roulant serves 90 meals a day to seniors and people losing their functional independence. And it does so in innovative ways that serve both the environment and the community.

"Our mission is to break barriers between the genera-

"Our mission is to break barriers between the generations, using food as a vehicle."

tions, using food as a vehicle," says Jane Rabinowicz, the organization's executive director.

Santropol Roulant was founded in 1995 by two young waiters from the Café Santropol, a restaurant with a social conscience on St. Urbain Street, near author Mordecai Richler's old haunts. The idea was to give young people meaningful work experience while meeting the needs of local seniors. Inter-generational interaction would

also help break down stereotypes while building bonds that would create a stronger local community.

Volunteers deliver most meals on bicycle or on foot.

The organization was a success and it grew; but Ms. Rabinowicz said that they quickly found that if they took on more than 100 meal deliveries, the project lost its personal touch, and the quality of the service suffered.

So, instead of delivering

more meals, they focused on lessening their environmental impact and expanding how the organization approaches its mission to use food as a vehicle for community building. Every summer, she said, volunteers grow one tonne of fruits and vegetables on urban rooftop gardens; the food is used for the meals, while waste is fed into a vermicomposting operation whose results are used as fertilizer.

A volunteer-run bike shop

maintains the bikes used for delivery, while teaching bike repair to community members.

Throughout, Santropol Roulant has been able to count on Concordia University as a resource; the university has helped with staff, volunteer training and using a student-run club to deliver meals.

"Santropol Roulant," said Ms. Rabinowicz, "is a good example of the community building Concordia wants to promote."

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