ABSTRACT

THE FISHERIES CRISIS IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR: 
STATUS OF COMMUNITY

By

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Rural communities world wide struggle to maintain economic viability as their populations shrink from lower birth rates and outmigration. When such locales have been dependent on a declining natural resource base, the challenge to survive is even greater. In 1992 the Canadian government announced a moratorium on cod fishing in the Atlantic Maritime provinces, which resulted in an upheaval of economic, social and cultural ways that were centered on the cod fishery for centuries. This research examined the social, economic and political history of two clusters of communities caught up in the crisis—on coastal Labrador and on the Avalon Peninsula of the island of Newfoundland—and how they managed to adapt.

The focus of this study is on the interrelatedness of two aspects of social capital—the characteristics of local social structures and the civic culture—and how they impact community socioeconomic well-being. Data gathered from participant observation and from over 100 in-depth interviews with leaders of local institutions, fishers and citizens are supplemented with quantitative information from census, community and government records.

The results show that when adjacent communities band together to tackle challenges to community well-being, the likelihood of achieving substantial results with development initiatives is much higher than if individual locales attempt to do so separately. Positive outcomes are more feasible when there is an abundance of local social structures, in particular, small businesses and a financial institution, working collaboratively with development groups. Leaders from diverse backgrounds who promote inclusiveness and grassroots involvement are also key to successful community development efforts. This research documents the adjustments experienced by these communities as the result of the cod collapse and contributes to a better understanding of how rural communities handle significant environmental and economic change.