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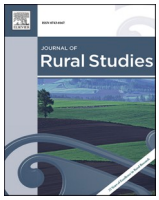

Grappling with governance: Emerging approaches to build community economies☆

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ABSTRACT

Economic development is evolving, where building the economy was once the largely purview of businesses and governments, increasingly, communities are taking action to build local economies that are more sustainable, equitable and inclusive. As community participation in local economic development increases, new, more collaborative governance models are beginning to emerge. This research leverages a community economies framework to explore the role of non-traditional, community actors in advancing local economic development. Building on the local, rural, and asset-based community development scholarship, this study aims to fill the gap in the literature through an empirical investigation into how one rural community, in Prince Edward County, Ontario, is developing a new governance structure to build a community-led economic development plan. Data for this research was collected through focus groups, key informant interviews and community conversations. Results highlight that when building the local economy, especially in rural communities, it is important to take an assets-first approach; leverage cross-sector partnerships; and experiment with innovative models to drive economic development. This research also illustrates the complexity of developing an alternative governance structure and offers perspectives on navigating the changing field of local economic development.

1. Introduction

The most significant challenges the world is facing are being experienced at the local level. Communities around the globe are dealing with a poly-crisis, or the intersecting realities of climate change, pandemic recovery, deep socio-economic inequities, and extractive economic policies. It follows that as communities experience these challenges, solutions are also beginning to emerge at the local level. Indeed, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and municipal governments are exploring new ways to collaborate across sectors, and harness local assets to build their communities and bolster local economies. Where traditional models of economic development favour growth, emerging alternative, community-led approaches challenge pro-growth models in favour of new principles that center quality of life and build local economies that promote sustainability and equity (Longhurst et al., 2016; Lennox and Hollender, 2020; Guinan and Martin, 2019a).

While community-led economic initiatives are growing, they are often without precedent, leaving communities searching to establish new approaches to economic development and alternative governance models to support their goals and advance their objectives. The scholarship in this area remains somewhat underdeveloped as well; where there is wide-spread support for diverse actors participating in community-led approaches to economic development (Malizia et al., 2021; Leigh and Blakely, 2017; Jamal, 2018), and in the area of collaborative governance (Bradford 2015; Ansell and Gash 2008; Gibson, 2019; Clarke, 2017), there remains limited scholarship on *how* community-led governance structures can influence local-level change, especially in the context of rural communities.

This research aims to fill that gap and is focused on the role that community-led governance can play in building more sustainable and equitable rural economies that improve the quality of life of all residents. This paper is guided by a theoretical framework advanced by Rajan (2019) who argues that our economies are imbalanced and that we need to build 'the third pillar' – our communities – as a ballast to market and government involvement. Rajan's research resonates with the scholarship of Katz and Nowak (2017) who advance the idea of 'new

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localism'. A new localist approach argues that in the twenty-first century, local leaders and communities have emerged as the most influential problem solvers to global challenges; their research highlights how communities, in both rural and urban settings, are less rigid and more pragmatic than higher orders of government, and that through strong networks and connections at the local level, they can create meaningful change. New localism also aligns with local and rural economic development scholarship that describes the important role that non-traditional actors (Malizia et al., 2021; Leigh and Blakely, 2017; Caldwell, 2013; Kammer-Kerwick et al., 2022; Ratner and Markley, 2014; Ratner, 2019; Snow and DicKard, 2001; Reimer, 2006), or community leaders and non-profits, can play in building local, community-led economies.

As such, it is through this theoretical framework, that advances the importance of local, cross-sector partnerships, that this research asks: *How can rural communities collaborate locally to build stronger, more resilient community-led economies?* This paper will first explore the literature as it relates to building local economies. It will then explore the findings of one project that stemmed from a pan-Canadian pilot project, focused on how to strengthen community economies. This research aims to understand how one rural community – in Prince Edward County, Ontario – can build their economy through a new governance structure or architecture for collaboration. Findings from this research begin to highlight the importance of national support for local action as well as the importance of cross-sector local organizing to address global issues.

2. Literature review

This review of the literature will explore local, rural, and asset-based community development, and will position this study in the context of the emergent community economies and community wealth building literatures.

2.1. Local and rural economic development

The past two decades have seen significant changes to the practice of economic development, or the policies and programs that create wealth and jobs in communities. Where early approaches to economic development were focused largely on wealth and job creation, emerging models of community or local economic development (LED) are more inclusive of a broader set of actors (Malizia et al., 2021; Reese, 2014; Sutton et al., 2022; Leigh and Blakely, 2017). Where the two-actor model of economic development prioritized the role of businesses and governments in building the economy, emerging approaches have added community actors into local economic development policy making and processes. The impact of this three-actor model of economic development – communities, businesses, and governments – resonates with the approach advanced by Rajan (2019) who argues that we need to build the 'third pillar' of our society, our communities, to ensure that local economies are more resilient, sustainable, and equitable.

LED builds on principles of both community development and economic development and recognizes the role that residents play in building their communities and ultimately the local economy. The inclusion of community actors in local economic development takes on a variety of forms, including the participation of residents' groups, nonprofits, and other community partners. Where traditional economic development is grounded in principles of pro-growth and wealth creation, local economic development expands these considerations to include strategies that improve the quality of life of residents; centering sustainability and equity as desired outcomes of new initiatives and investments (Conti and Giaccaria, 2009; Leigh and Blakely, 2017; Carroll and Blair, 2009). Community development, as both a theory and a practice, has been long concerned with equity and the inclusion of local voices in shaping a community's goals and aspirations. Communities have organized to find local solutions to a range of issues from poverty reduction to affordable housing to tackling systemic inequities (Rubin and Rubin, 2008). Key principles of community development include leveraging local knowledge and skills; the organic development of processes; and advancing advocacy strategies and promoting inclusivity (Waweru, 2015).

LED is a widely used practice in rural communities (Caldwell, 2013; Moseley, 2003; Li et al., 2019), building capacity and local engagement through both collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash, 2008) and multi-level governance (Gibson, 2019; Bock, 2019). The rural economic development scholarship is diverse, it includes a focus on rural downtown revitalization and renewal (Burayidi, 2001; Bias et al., 2015; Vodden et al., 2015), promoting business retention and supports for rural entrepreneurs (Fortunato, 2014; Reimer, 2006; Korsgaard, Steffen, and Hanne Wittorff Tanvig, 2015). There has also been an emergence of scholarship on attracting and retaining knowledge and creative workers in rural communities (McGranahan et al., 2010; Mcgranahan and Wojan, 2007; Sands and Reese, 2008; Lewis and Donald, 2010) and the rise of coworking, or shared workspaces, spaces to support these workers (Bosworth et al., 2023; Vogl and Akhavan, 2022; Jamal, 2018). Rural economic development scholarship also explores the role of leveraging local heritage and cultural assets to promoting tourism (Stolarick et al., 2010; Rocke and Ramsey, 2017; Holland et al., 2014) in building the local economy.

2.2. Asset based community development

The practice of asset-based community development (ABCD), or identifying and leveraging local assets to build the local community and economy, has emerged as a complementary practice to LED. ABCD seeks to frame community development through an asset, rather than a deficit-based, approach (Mathie et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2016) and has been used in rural communities to build momentum to create both social and economic change (Reimer, 2006; Booth and Kearn, 2019; Snow and DicKard, 2001; Kammer-Kerwick et al., 2022; Kobayashi et al., 2020). ABCD has resonance in a rural context because it focuses on local strengths, and as a practice, seeks to empower communities by identifying, connecting, and ultimately activating assets through local leadership (McKnight, 2017). An ABCD process has resonance with a 'new localism' approach that highlights the importance of 'mediating' institutions (Katz and Nowak, 2017, 8) such as nonprofits and community associations in creating networks that foster change in communities. An ABCD process also leverages 'place-based' (Clarke, 2017; Shrivastava and Kennelly, 2013) strategies that look to distinguishing local features to create and build local economies. This approach is becoming increasingly common in small towns and rural communities, rich in cultural and natural assets, who are seeking to build their economies through everything from fostering a local entrepreneurial ecosystem to growing the visitor economy (Stolarick et al., 2010; Caldwell, 2013; Snow and DicKard, 2001; Korsgaard, Steffen, and Hanne Wittorff Tanvig, 2015; Fortunato 2014). ABCD processes have also been used in rural communities around the world (Snow and DicKard 2001; Stolarick et al., 2010; Kammer-Kerwick et al., 2022) and across Canada (Booth and Kearn, 2019) to promote healthier communities (Kobayashi et al., 2020), advance sustainable tourism strategies (Stolarick et al., 2010; Rocke and Ramsey, 2017) and generally build stronger local economies (Fathers, Morris with Brady Holek, and Khan, 2021). From supporting the reimagining of local economies in British Columbia to tourism planning in Newfoundland, ABCD is harnessing local voices and assets to drive economic change.

2.3. Community economies and community wealth building

The practice of local and asset-based community development is rooted the community economies literature. Embedded within the community economies literature is the idea that capitalist or pro-growth approaches to the economy have failed communities (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2008; J. K. Gibson-Graham and Kelly, 2020;

Community Economies Collective, 2019; Foley and Mather, 2016). Gibson-Graham argue that communities have been left behind by extractive economic policies that have provided profit to shareholders while degrading environment; their research on community economies (2008; 2006) challenges the primacy of a pro-growth, capitalist economy. Gibson-Graham argue in favour of "taking back" the economy (Gibson-Graham and Kelly, 2020) and prioritizing people and planet over profit. In exploring the importance of diverse community economies, Gibson-Graham's research seeks to understand how wealth can be generated and shared within communities.

Similarly, in the early 2000s The Democracy Collaborative coined the term community wealth building (CWB). Described as a system-changing approach to building local economies, CWB seeks to connect and scale one-off approaches to local economic development to create more democratic and sustainable economies (The Democracy Collaborative, 2020; McInroy et al., 2022a,b). Reacting to extractive economic policies that left communities vulnerable, CWB as a form of economic development is concerned with creating meaningful, democratic economic change by leveraging existing assets or wealth and anchoring it within communities (Guinan and Martin, 2019a,b; Ratner, 2019; Dubb, 2016). The Democracy Collaborative approach to CWB is grounded in five pillars, these include: inclusive and democratic enterprise; progressive procurement; locally rooted finance; fair work; and the just use of land and property (McInroy et al., 2022a,b). Indeed, there have been several communities around the world who are experimenting with a CWB approach to build their local economies. In Preston, England, a community of just over 100,000 residents, they have developed a robust social procurement policy with local anchor institutions that has resulted in the increase in cooperatives and locally owned businesses to support and build the supply chain (Manley and Whyman, 2021). The resonance of CWB within rural communities is also being explored by scholars to the extent that it can retain wealth and keep it circulating in rural communities and develop local talent to build the economy (Ratner and Markley, 2014; Ratner, 2019). In Ontario, the Ontario Nonprofit Network and Buy Social Canada explore how Ontario's nonprofits are leading in advancing community wealth building projects, specifically social procurement and local workforce development, in communities across the province (Buy Social Canada, 2021). This challenge has been taken up in Windsor-Essex where a Community Benefits Agreement has been created to ensure that community voices are included in a major infrastructure project (Fathers, Morris with Brady Holek, and Khan, 2021).

With a history of deep engagement with the cooperative movement, credit unions, and the presence of strong social bonds (Kamara, 2021; Caldwell, 2013; Korsgaard, Steffen, and Hanne Wittorff Tanvig, 2015; Petric and Gibson 2022; Kammer-Kerwick et al., 2022; Reimer, 2006; Caldwell et al., 2017; Akimowicz et al., 2023), rural communities are well-positioned to become leaders in LED and CWB initiatives. As such, emerging from this review of the literature, this study aims to fill a gap in the scholarship with respect to how both ABCD and collaborative, cross-sector governance models can foster rural economic resilience and build community economies.

3. Community economies pilot project

The *Community Economies Pilot* project was launched by Shorefast, Community Foundations Canada and the Canadian Urban Institute in 2021 in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic with a goal of building a pan-Canadian network of communities. As a research partner in this pilot, the University of Guelph team attended online meetings with project partners and participating communities. This pilot was designed to share best and promising practices; build networks; and identify policy and other systemic barriers to building resilient community economies. The pilot project was curious to explore how four key drivers could help build local economies these included the ability to: attract and retain capital; develop architectures of collaboration; access and leverage data; build local capacity (Shorefast, 2022). In addition to South Island (British Columbia), Fogo Island (Newfoundland), London and Hamilton (Ontario), Prince Edward County (PEC) was one of the five pilot communities chosen for the pilot. As the the project developed, local leaders in PEC created a new group – or a new architecture of collaboration – called Thrive PEC. Comprised of representatives from three groups, the municipality, The County Foundation and Community Futures, a community focused social enterprise that fosters local economic development through impact investing. Thrive PEC was launched with a stated goal to create a community-led economic development plan.

PEC is a complex rural community, located on the eastern shores of Lake Ontario, that enjoys extensive natural heritage, cultural and physical assets. With a small, and slowly growing, permanent population of 25,704, Prince Edward County is also home to more than 7000 seasonal residents – a number that is predicted to continue to grow to 31% of the population by 2038 (The County Foundation, 2022). PEC's population is spread across a vast and varied landmass that is described as a "nearly self-contained island" of approximately 1050 square kilometers with 800 km of shoreline (County of Prince Edward Development Services, 2021, 5). The economy of PEC is deeply rooted in agriculture and influenced by viticulture and tourism, yet as a new, more knowledge-intensive economy continues to grow globally, so too does PEC's base of knowledge workers and companies. PEC's natural heritage and economy are also supported by its rich cultural history. Situated on the traditional territory of Huron-Wendat, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples, PEC's Official Plan speaks to the importance of Indigenous heritage in the area.

Despite this "self-contained" status, PEC is not immune to the impact of global trends. In 2021 PEC joined more than 645 municipalities across Canada in declaring a Climate Emergency and created an Environmental Advisory Committee as a key priority of County Council. The global COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the limits of PEC's reliance on tourism as an economic driver. This influx of domestic tourism during the pandemic left many residents feeling excluded from the amenities in their own community (Dickens et al., 2021). During this time, the housing market also continued to grow. Municipal data show that between 2020 and 2022, average home prices rose from $693,000 to $1.2 million, a 74.6% increase. The continued growth of remote working options may also have longer-term impact on PEC's historically slow-growing population. A 2022 uptick in population growth, noted in the 2022 Vital Signs report (The County Foundation 2022), may be an indication of continued growth to come and will continue to fuel the affordability crisis.

5. Methods

Focused on supporting Thrive PEC to develop a community-led economic development plan, a multi-pronged data collection process was co-designed by Thrive PEC, leaders from the Community Economies Pilot, and a research team at the University of Guelph. In Spring 2022, seven Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) workshops were held in Prince Edward County. These workshops were designed to get the community focused on its assets and strengths and how they could support and build the local economy. These ABCD sessions included representatives from businesses, government, nonprofits, and residents. Invitations were sent out through the Thrive PEC network and the sessions were advertised on social media and in local newspapers. All ABCD sessions followed a similar format where the concept was introduced, and residents were asked to map local assets in the following categories: natural, economic, cultural, built, and organizational. More than 400 people participated in seven sessions between May and August 2021.

As a follow up to the ABCD sessions, 22 semi-structured interviews, both digital and in-person, were held with members of the Prince Edward County community in August and September 2022. Interviewees were identified by the Thrive PEC team and were chosen to

represent a cross-section of perspectives in Prince Edward County. These interviews were held with residents, nonprofits, business owners, youth, seniors, real estate developers and investors. The goal of these interviews was to explore how the community perceived local economic development practice in Prince Edward County and their reaction to the formation of Thrive PEC. Interviewees were able to choose whether to participate in interviews face-to-face or online. Both options were provided to make it more convenient for interviewees to participate. There appeared to be no difference in the quality of interview between face-to-face and online interviews because the same interview guide and probing questions were used for each situation.

In addition to community interviews, two focus group sessions were held with the convening members of Thrive PEC, one in August 2022, and the second in October 2022. Both focus group sessions were conducted with the same six leaders present and in a round table approach, where a researcher would ask a question and each member would have an opportunity to answer. This allowed all Thrive leaders to provide their opinion and created a balanced conversation. The conversation in the August 2022 focus group centered around why and how Thrive PEC was created and the benefits and challenges the group had faced to date. The October 2022 focus group asked again about the benefits and challenges Thrive had faced and their opinion on the future of Thrive.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo. A content analysis approach was used for coding which grouped findings into strengths, challenges, and future visions for the community (Yin, 2017). Within these categories, sub-categories were created to identify themes. Initial findings from both the ABCD sessions and the interviews were shared by the researchers in a community meeting attended by over 80 residents in October 2022. This was an opportunity to share ideas and preliminary recommendations and also gather feedback from the community.

6. Results

6.1. Asset based community development (ABCD) sessions

Through the seven ABCD sessions with more than 400 residents, several themes emerged (Table 1). Findings from the ABCD sessions in Prince Edward County highlight the wealth of assets PEC residents see within their community. In many cases, this stems from pride of place and honors their vast geography that is filled with both human, economic, and natural heritage assets. Through facilitated discussions at local community venues, community members were asked to map Prince Edward County's economic, natural, cultural, built, and organizational assets. These included everything from a rich entrepreneurial culture to a vast and beautiful landscape with beaches and green spaces. Prince Edward County was also characterized as having a deep and connected arts and cultural community in the context of a beautiful old towns with heritage buildings. A key asset that also emerged was The County's agricultural roots which has developed into a strong wine and culinary tourism industry.

At each ABCD session, assets were discussed and described in small groups and then shared back with the broader group. Six themes emerged from the ABCD sessions: the importance of economic diversification and innovation; the desire to create a proactive and sustainable tourism strategy; the value of balancing growth and investment with residents' quality of life; the importance of protecting and celebrating natural heritage; the desire to expand support networks and support newcomers; and the importance of celebrating place, culture, and community (see Table 1).

Table 1
ABCD mapping themes.

Area	Theme
Economy	The importance of economic diversification and innovation.
Tourism/Economy	The desire to create pro-active and sustainable tourism strategies.
Economy/Quality of life	The value of balancing growth and investment with residents' quality of life.
Culture/Community	The importance of protecting and celebrating natural heritage.
Community	The desire to expand support networks and better welcome newcomers.
Community	The importance of celebrating place, culture, community.

Community members also shared their thoughts on the pace of growth and change in Prince Edward County. This has led some to feel as though they have less control over The County's future. Community members highlighted the tensions between a rapidly growing visitor economy and environmental sustainability. They spoke about the balance between protecting the quality of life of PEC residents while also absorbing the benefits of new development and growth. With more than 10 distinct communities within PEC, residents also pointed out the ways in which these benefits are being unequally experienced across The County.

6.2. Community key-informant interviews

Between July and October 2022, building on the momentum of the ABCD sessions, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted by the research team. Respondents were asked to speak to Prince Edward County's strengths or assets as well as to identify weaknesses or challenges. Through this exercise, several common strengths emerged; many of which were closely aligned with the findings from the ABCD sessions. Most notably County residents spoke about the physical assets embedded in the area, including the landscape, the beaches, and the rich cultural and Indigenous heritage. In addition, community ties and connections were also identified as a strong asset and were mentioned by 19 out of 22 participants. Tourism and the overall County brand were also described as a key asset – with more than half of the interviewees feeling that PEC is 'on the map' and known provincially, nationally, and even internationally.

In the interviews, residents were also asked to identify challenges that were being faced within PEC. Most notability the issue of affordability, housing, and the impact of short-term accommodations were raised by 17 out of 22 interviewees; concerns about affordability spanned housing as well as the overall cost of living in Prince Edward County. Resident 3 mentioned that "kids who grew up here can't afford to stay here." In addition, it was felt that short-term accommodations or rentals were challenging the neighborhood feel in some areas, making them feel like "ghost towns" off season. As the population of PEC continues to grow, several respondents also indicated that many social services including long term care spaces, daycare spaces and mental health services, were either lacking or entirely unavailable. Several residents also spoke to these shifting demographics to describe the growing gap in wealth distribution within The County.

When asked about who was advancing economic development, or about the policies and programs that support the local economy in PEC, several perspectives emerged. Most respondents felt that economic development was managed or "owned" by the municipality, while others shared that the business community was also leading, or should be leading, in this area. Resident 17 shared, "the municipality leads economic development initiatives in Prince Edward County, I think that there has to be less … control by the municipality, and it has to be more community [engagement]." Others felt that economic development was the responsibility of the business community. Resident 14 stated "I think a lot of those types of [activities should be] grassroots, they tend to be organized by the entrepreneurs in the community. So, I don't think it should be The County because I think it wouldn't feel as entrepreneurial and as grassroots if it were organized by … the municipality".

Other respondents felt somewhat confused about who was in a leadership role with respect to economic development. For example, Resident 9 when asked who should lead economic developed said,

"theoretically, the municipality, and in reality, probably business owners. I think business owners and the municipality are probably at the forefront." And this perspective was echoed here again by Resident 2, "There's a dance, there's an overlap there [with businesses]. So, who's responsible for what? And a lot of people default to the municipality … they have the power and control to say yes and no to things." The issue of longer-term economic planning also came up in the interviews with Resident 2 sharing, "I don't know that we have a growth plan or an economic plan. We have a tourism management plan. And we have downtown revitalization plans and all these things. But where is our economic strategic plan?" Resident 5 also shared, "When it comes to economic development, the affordable housing crisis, as we call it, it's a challenge that must be met, mostly by government, requiring developers to increase the amount of mixed-use development that they're putting in the ground. I don't think it can really be solved by the private sector, per se, unless you're a developer and you go along for the ride with the government".

Respondents also brought forward comments about the newly formed group, Thrive PEC. There was broadly felt support for Thrive PEC from respondents, and much curiosity about their role, responsibilities, and next actions. Resident 8 shared their excitement over the formation of Thrive PEC, "We're finally getting all these incredibly smart, capable people in a room together, which has never really been done before. And I think even just the exercise of finding those people [identifying] who's an actor in this or a potential actor is, or an activator." Resident 2 shared that Thrive PEC should become a more central feature in County economic development, "Thrive [is] on the right track. Community Economic Development Commission should be swallowed up by that. There [are] a number of other groups, I think that could be swallowed up by this Thrive concept with those pillars … the three pillars of, government, community and business. So, thinking … of the structure, I would say that Thrive has the potential to be that answer. If all the stars align, and all the right people get to the table".

In addition, the organic or grassroots nature of Thrive PEC resonated with respondents. Resident 5 shared "I think this idea of doing a bottom up …. grassroots kind of envisioning where we want to be is great. I think the challenge with any change or plan that you have over the long term, is trying to keep everyone between the guardrails and being strong enough to say notice things are outside the guardrails." However, Resident 5 went on to say that Thrive PEC's work also needs to be reviewed by the community, "I think there's a validation activity that needs to happen thereafter, to take it to the greater population".

Some concern was raised about the membership of Thrive PEC by Resident 2, "I think getting people together to talk about their future, and where we should invest is never a bad thing. I worry a bit that Thrive doesn't totally represent The County though … so I worry that when we do come up with something, the 16,000 people who've been here for multiple generations will look at it and say, well, that doesn't represent us. That doesn't represent me." The majority of respondents, however, expressed their curiosity and interest in the work Thrive PEC was undertaking. Resident 3 shared "when I heard about the Thrive initiative, frankly, [I thought] this is fantastic, because it's going to give us [the ability of] actually articulating the local assets and a vision for the future for The County".

When asked about how formal Thrive PEC should be, there was widespread support for keeping Thrive PEC as a loose structure for the time being. It was felt that flexibility was needed to begin this work and establish relationships and impact. It was also agreed that there was no other organization filling this gap in the community and that Thrive PEC was playing an important role. Finally Thrive PEC was encouraged to be "open [with the fact] that there is no clear path forward" and that they are in the process of "co-creating" a vision of the economy with the community. Indeed, Thrive PEC was described as a "holding space" or a "container" for emerging community economy discussions.

The final question in the interviews sought to understand residents' vision for the future. Several visions expressed by residents were linked to their vision for an inclusive economy – residents want an affordable community with high quality jobs. They also spoke about the importance of promoting the arts, culture and advancing quality education and providing comprehensive social services. Visions also included the importance of preserving the natural heritage of The County. Another key vision for the future included ensuring that PEC is a welcoming, inclusive community that nurtures its youth and most vulnerable, while creating space for new people and new ideas. A final theme that emerged strongly in the vision for the future of PEC was linked to the idea of a shared, long-term plan for the future that includes both an economic development and a climate action plan.

6.3. Thrive PEC leadership focus groups

Two focus group conversations were conducted with the six leaders of Thrive PEC. These conversations revolved around the benefits and challenges of forming Thrive PEC and the group's future priorities. Several themes emerged: the impact on the community of taking an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach to building a community-led economic development plan; confirmation that interdisciplinary, cross sector conversations were essential to building the local economy; and that resources and clearer governance were needed to support Thrive PEC into the future.

Referencing the ABCD as a method to capture information, a Thrive PEC member three shared, "I think this is a real opportunity for people to not only have a voice … I think for people to really see outcomes from their voice [in the ABCD sessions]." It was important to Thrive PEC to ensure all community members had access to participate and the findings from the session were inclusive and representative of the community. Even after participation of 250 people, member six shared, "I think we can continue [engaging the community] because there are stakeholders we're missing." Thrive PEC members spoke about their interest in engaging more youth, diverse communities, and seniors as their work evolved. Their goal was to ensure that community included. For example, member four considered community to be "everybody in this place. [Our] community includes municipality, includes businesses, includes local nonprofits".

Members also spoke about the benefits of focusing on assets in community conversations, and the complexity of taking those assets and building a community-led economic development plan. Member three stated, "this ABCD approach, it's a positive approach. And it's so very different than what's happened in the past that looks at what are the gaps which leads to negative kind of conversations. This community is really split, there's a lot of negativity, we really have to change the narrative. Taking the positive approach, people are really, really liking that." The ideas generated were also significant as explained by member five, "there are so many small things that one could do on any one of those themes, from childcare to bike lanes to protection of the environment to diversifying workforce development." This shows that there can be a diverse range of actions that can help form the foundation of a community-led economic development plan; it also highlights the importance of prioritization and coordination of activities.

This led Thrive PEC to begin to think of their role as supporting, scaling, and amplifying existing projects, "Thrive can be a connector and it can be a convenor. Folks from the [farmer's] markets can have a function, or the business community can bring technical knowledge or expertise, or financial resources to solving [these issues] that are integral to get the community that we want," said member five. Thrive PEC described their role as a "container" for new ideas and an emerging and distinct "architecture of collaboration". They also described themselves as a "connector of the dots" and a "convenor" of cross-sector, interdisciplinary conversations. It was felt that this connecting role was a gap in the community and that Thrive PEC helps to facilitate a new, more collaborative way forward in Prince Edward County. Member five stated, "one of the things that's been phenomenal to accomplish is that we've pulled people together and named some of the challenges, named

some of the problems … and we've aired some of that in a constructive manner that has given people permission to engage." Thrive PEC member one mentioned how Thrive PEC has allowed them to engage with more people than their role would usually entail; they stated, "If I wasn't doing this project, I would not actually have any involvement with youth, I probably wouldn't have met with [name of local business leader]. Thrive has allowed me to have a legitimate purpose to go towards groups and be able to work in a new way".

The second focus group in October 2022 surfaced more challenges around Thrive PEC's resources, relationships, and governance than the first focus group two months prior. This is due to the experience the group had gained over the course of the two months and that they were entering a new phase where they would need to make decisions on the future direction of Thrive. Member five stated, "I think once armed with a report, armed with a structure, and a plan … we may get resources to support the structure from the provincial government, the federal government, or private foundations." With respect to the municipal government, member one stated, "it is kind of a tricky relationship … because this is not a solely municipal endeavor." Member five shared that Thrive PEC is, "very respectful of and works around the municipality's own processes, corporate strategic planning." As the group discussed their governance, they acknowledged that they may need to begin to develop terms of reference for the group. Members also acknowledged that as a loose structure, Thrive PEC can garner a broader community response; describing the formal process of making a presentation to County Council, it was felt that, "Thrive takes the heat out of some things ….[when sharing ideas] with Thrive, it's like, you are in the community, and you are hearing from the community ….You're accountable, but it's just sort of like we're sharing information" (Member 1).

7. Discussion

This research project began as an extension of the *Community Economies Pilot*; a pan-Canadian project that was seeking to explore how to strengthen community economies through four pillars: attracting and retaining capital; leveraging data; building capacity; and creating new architectures of collaboration (Shorefast, 2022). This project's research question picked up on the fourth pillar and asked: *How can rural communities collaborate locally to build stronger, more resilient community-led economies?* In partnership with PEC, the research team explored perceptions around local assets, challenges, and views on local economic development. This question was informed by the theoretical framing advanced by Rajan's 'third pillar' (2019), Katz and Nowak's investigation into the rise of 'new localism' (2017), and the rural studies literature that speaks to the important role of non-traditional actors in economic development (Malizia et al., 2021; Leigh and Blakely, 2017). While there is emerging literature in this space, this research represents an empirical exploration of one rural community grappling with a new approach to governance in their economic development planning.

The emergence of Thrive PEC was inspired by the *Community Economies Pilot*, and through a partnership with the University of Guelph, we facilitated community dialogues; used ABCD to map local assets; and then explored the community's understanding of both economic development and Thrive PEC through a series of key informant interviews. What emerged through the findings exposes the complexity of creating a more inclusive, community-led approach to economic development; it also highlighted the community's willingness to engage, experiment, and collaborate across sectors. Through these findings, this research offers five intersecting recommendations to support Thrive PEC, and indeed other rural communities, as they begin to work toward their stated goal of creating a community-led economic development plan. These recommendations highlight the collective importance of leveraging local assets to build community wealth; working across sectors; experimenting with new economic development approaches; discovering alternative revenue sources; and confirming a governance approach.

7.1. Leverage local assets to build a community wealth

The findings from this research highlight the importance of beginning with an assets-first approach. Not only does this highlight richness of assets found in PEC, the foundation for building the local economy, but is also engages the community in a future-looking dialogue around leveraging these assets to develop new economic opportunities. Where current approaches to economic development focus on attracting industry and the visitor economy, emergent approaches can leverage new approaches that are driven by strengths or assets within The County such as a large pool of local talent and volunteers; a strong entrepreneurial community; a deep commitment and celebration of the arts; and a rich natural heritage. In addition, PEC could explore collaborations with their local anchor institutions, such as hospitals and the municipality to build out a social procurement model that would create and retain wealth locally (Buy Social Canada, 2021). Taking an assets-first approach has resonance with a community wealth building (CWB) approach that promotes leveraging and retaining wealth and decision making locally (Guinan and Martin, 2019a).

7.2. Work across sectors to develop priorities and a community-led economic development plan

The ABCD or asset-mapping exercise highlighted the community's strengths across all three sectors, or pillars – community, business, and government (Rajan, 2019). From a strong business community to an active nonprofit sector and an engaged municipality, it was widely acknowledged that capacity to impact change rested in all three areas. In addition, through the creation of Thrive PEC and its role in "connecting the dots", Thrive PEC is uniquely positioned to develop and experiment with new community-led priorities and coordinate activity across sectors. This approach could help unlock new economic development opportunities for Prince Edward County and serves as a model for rural economic development more broadly.

7.3. Differentiate community-led economic development activities and experiment with new approaches

In building a new, community-led economic development plan, Thrive PEC can actively support and create a space for innovation and experimentation. New models of economic development are advancing creative ideas around local ownership of assets; social finance for emerging initiatives; and building projects that are community-owned and operated. These models, from land trusts to community benefits agreements to social procurement, are being tested in communities around the world (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2018; Longaphy and Claire-Helene Heese-Boutin, 2019; Fathers, Morris with Brady Holek, and Khan, 2021). Thrive PEC is uniquely positioned to create a network with other cities and bring new, innovative ideas into Prince Edward County. Through education, awareness raising, and experimentation with new ideas, Thrive PEC can either lead these changes or help catalyze or incubate new nonprofits to test and launch new projects. Once established, these initiatives can be scaled, supported, and shared with other rural communities.

7.4. New supports are needed to fund community-economies building projects

It can be challenging to source and secure funding for new projects to build the local economy and retain wealth in rural communities. However, through cross-sector collaboration and experimentation, Thrive PEC is well positioned to attract funding from local social finance or community bond investors; philanthropic foundations; and all levels of government. Indeed, in a Shorefast *Community Economies* report,

Mendelsohn noted that the federal government should, "invest in communities as nation-building assets" (2022, 4). The report distinguishes communities from municipal governments and encourages federal investment in everything from co-operatives and employee ownership strategies to community financial institutions and community-led organizations (Mendelsohn, 2022). Thrive PEC can help illustrate the possibility of alternative approaches (Lennox and Hollender 2020; Longhurst et al., 2016; Grady and Jamal, 2020) to economic development.

7.5. Begin to formalize the architecture of collaboration

While a loose governance structure was described as favorable by the community, the need for a more solid structure will emerge as Thrive PEC continues to advance new initiatives, apply for grants, and hire staff and host community education sessions. Thrive PEC could begin by drafting a list of shared principles that guide its work, its programming, and decision making. In addition, terms of reference can help define membership terms and recruitment; relationship with partners and the municipality; and key activities that the group will undertake together. On the latter point, rather than a multi-year strategic plan, Thrive PEC could develop an annual action plan to share with the community and help guide its work. This would help the community understand the actions Thrive PEC is undertaking relative to municipal efforts.

These recommendations can benefit economic developers as they look for new ways to engage rural communities, they can also benefit community leaders who are searching for a new, more collaborative way to build rural economies. While this research presented a model to approach the building of a community-led economic development plan, it is limited to the extent that each community is distinct and needs to ensure that they take local conditions into account as the develop their engagement plans.

8. Conclusions

Economic development theory and practice is evolving, where policies and programs to build the economy were once the purview of businesses and governments, newer models have become more inclusive of community voices, values, and perspectives (Leigh and Blakely, 2017; Malizia et al., 2021). The inclusion of community members, including nonprofits, foundations, and residents' associations, in economic development planning is helping bolster the 'third pillar' of our society (Rajan, 2019). This balance across the business, government, and community sectors ensures that economic decision making is not only focused on job creation and wealth building, but that it also considers quality of life, equity, and environmental sustainability. Indeed, newer models of economic development are beginning to explore how to keep and share wealth locally. Community wealth building (Guinan and Martin, 2019a; Dubb, 2016; McInroy et al., 2022a,b) has emerged as a new model to build and create local economies and nonprofit organizations (Buy Social Canada, 2021) are playing a key role in their development. The idea behind community wealth building is to harness local assets, build an economy around them, and ensure that ownership and wealth remains local.

As the economic development paradigm begins to shift, Katz and Nowak's (2017) research on new localism, or the ways in which solutions can be generated at the local level, becomes more central. A key element of new localism asserts that 'power belongs to the problem solvers' (Katz and Nowak, 2017, 3), and indeed, this research has highlighted how a community-led process can begin to build engagement to generate local solutions designed to build the local economy. Despite this momentum, there remain challenges with respect to alternative governance models for community-led economic initiatives, and while Thrive PEC grapples with governance challenges, their very presence fills an important gap in PEC, serving to uncover, build and amplify community ideas and leadership toward building a more sustainable and equitable local economy.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Audrey C. Jamal: Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Rebecca Gordon:** Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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