

# Locality based entrepreneurship: A strategy for community economic vitality

Peter F. Korsching and John C. Allen

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**Abstract** *Entrepreneurship* has great potential as a *self-development strategy* for rural communities with declining economies, but nascent entrepreneurs often lack the knowledge necessary for starting a business and their communities often lack the physical and social infrastructure to support them. The EDGE (Enhancing, Developing, and Growing Entrepreneurs) educational programme developed by the Center for Applied Rural Innovation, University of Nebraska, is a community-based development programme that builds *community capacity* while providing grounded skills for entrepreneurs. This paper discusses the theoretical basis of EDGE and outlines an action model that has general relevance for the implementation of *community development* programmes.

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## Introduction

Many rural communities are experiencing difficulty in maintaining their economic and social vitality and fewer still are experiencing any type of growth or development. Reasons for the problems are many and they have been sufficiently explored in the literature. Exacerbating the situation is the lack of a coherent comprehensive national policy to address the problems and provide assistance to rural communities. Fortunately, research shows that for small communities self-development strategies offer great potential for improving local economic vitality. The characteristics of self-development projects are 1) involvement in the effort by local organizations, 2) substantial investment of local resources, and 3) local control of the resulting enterprises (Green *et al.*, 1990).

A self-development strategy with a strong potential for benefiting the local economy is the creation of new business enterprises, or what is more commonly known as entrepreneurship. Local entrepreneurs generally have a commitment to the community, unlike footloose recruited businesses that demand financial incentives and regulatory concessions to set up business (McNamara, Kriesel and Rainey, 1995). Also, with assistance from the local

community, entrepreneurial ventures have the characteristics of self-development projects, and therefore generate economic development as well as enhancing local problem solving capacity.

Mobilization and enhancement of the community problem solving capacity to promote and support entrepreneurship and other local improvement activities are key elements often missing in local development efforts. Nascent entrepreneurs may lack the business knowledge to implement their ideas (Gnyawali and Fogel, 1994) and the community may lack the infrastructure to help them achieve success (Bryant, 1989). An educational programme that provides nascent entrepreneurs the knowledge for starting and operating a business as well as mobilizing the leadership and resources of the community in support of the programme can provide the needed impetus to motivate entrepreneurs to action (Bryant, 1989). The structure of such a programme provides an asset orientation towards community and economic development, that is, it builds assets that increase capacity for improving the community (Green and Haines, 2002).

Such a programme, called the 'Enhancing, developing, and growing entrepreneurs' (EDGE) educational programme, has been developed and implemented by the Center for Applied Rural Innovation (CARI), University of Nebraska. Nebraska is largely a rural state with a sparse population and remote communities that are losing their social and economic viability. The programme is community-based with organizing principles derived primarily from community interaction field theory. In this paper we use an inductive approach to verify and refine the conceptual model that supports the programme based upon in-depth interviews with twenty-four programme leaders from a sample of eight EDGE participating communities.

## Theoretical foundation

Although entrepreneurship is an economic development strategy, we view it as embraced within the broader concept of community development, the latter defined as '... a group of people in a locality initiating a social process (i.e. planned intervention) to change their economic, social, cultural, and/or environmental situation' (Christianson and Robinson, 1989, p. 14). Community economic development connotes more than the concrete goals of creating jobs and generating income. Like community development, it is local improvement, but the specific focus is on the economic sector (Ryan, 1988). From the perspective of community interaction field theory, Wilkinson (1991) makes the distinction between development *in* the community and development *of* the community. Development *in* the community refers to specific tangible goals without any consideration of local involvement or

the distribution of benefits. Development of the community implies broad local involvement, broad distribution of benefits and improvement of the community's problem solving capacity. It is development of the community field. The structure of the field is strengthened though linking and coordinating locality oriented actions that serve public rather than private interests (Wilkinson, 1991).

Self-development strategy principles – local involvement, substantial local investment and local control of resulting enterprises – are consistent with this conceptualization of community development. Furthermore, individual entrepreneurship has a stronger potential for success when implemented as a community self-development strategy with community inputs into the formation of locally owned enterprises. Individuals who consider starting and operating a new business often lack the knowledge necessary for such a venture. Rural entrepreneurs also may lack other resources such as financing (Buss, Popovich and Gemmel, 1991), although cost and availability of credit is as much an obstacle in self-development as in other strategies (Green *et al.*, 1990). But the entrepreneurs are high in motivation and, because their roots are in the community, they have a commitment to the community that can be strengthened if the community actively works to facilitate their chances for a successful enterprise. Self-development also does not imply that all resources must come from within the community. More often than not rural communities lack the needed inputs to stimulate growth and development and external resources must be sought (Wilkinson, 1991). It is not the source of the resources that is at issue, rather who controls their local use. Therefore, a successful self-development programme supporting individual entrepreneurship will enhance local economic vitality through the creation of jobs and income. It is not a substitute for a diversified development programme that includes industrial recruitment, but the jobs produced tend to have higher salaries, higher skills and tend to be taken by local residents (Green *et al.*, 1990). Self-development strategies also build local problem solving capacity which can be used more effectively in industrial recruitment should the community decide to choose that option in the future.

Benefits of self-development strategies like entrepreneurship may not be readily evident to economic development professionals steeped in the industrial recruitment culture. Use of these strategies is facilitated by visionary leaders who, to some degree, must set aside their own interests and focus their actions on achieving the interest of the larger community and improving the capacity of the community to address its problems. And as already noted, few rural communities have all the resources needed to initiate and maintain sustained development. Therefore, an effective grass-roots strategy must consider the constraints to development and the need

to access external resources while retaining and building on local resources and advantages (Wilkinson, 1991). EDGE is built on these principles.

### Edge programme

EDGE is an umbrella organization for rural entrepreneurial training programmes hosted by local communities, whereby community capacity is developed while providing grounded business skills for rural citizens. Since 1993, the Nebraska EDGE has assisted more than 1,400 individuals in sixty-five different communities to start or improve their businesses.

EDGE incorporates several key philosophical premises. First, the structure was designed so that local groups of interested citizens representing a cross section of the community are the advocates at the local level. Second, the programme does not simply focus on transfer of knowledge and technology. Given theory and literature showing the importance of community in entrepreneurial success (Lamb, 1952; Gartner, 1985; Bryant, 1989; Van de Ven, 1993) it was deemed advisable to have a *community* programme rather than one simply focused on individual entrepreneurs. Although some of the outcomes are similar in that new business enterprises are developed and jobs are created, additional outcomes include a mobilization of local resources around entrepreneurial efforts that enhance the community economic and social base. The programme helps communities develop small business support networks and provide comprehensive education and skill development for individuals wanting to start or expand a business. Coalition building and tapping community assets are key to the success of this strategy.

Reflecting the above assumptions, EDGE programmes organize around community-based coalitions representing banks, local media, main street businesses, economic development service providers and numerous others interested in community and economic development. The local coalition has several responsibilities in hosting a fourteen-session entrepreneur training course. It hires a coordinator to organize and manage the programme, it advertises the programme to recruit student participants, it raises local match dollars and it hires an instructor who must be certified by the state administrator. Instructors are not necessarily teachers, but more often successful business people with some teaching or public presentation background. The coalition also provides guidance to the state administrator on needed curriculum development and specialized seminars, and it provides technical and moral support to the new entrepreneurs.

To participate in EDGE requires that the community, represented by a local organization that assumes the administrative responsibility (the lead organization), submit a request to CARI to be a partner in the programme.

CARI provides administrative support and a base of funding that the community must match. The community's request to participate, therefore, must include a plan for meeting its financial commitment.

In summary, EDGE is a community-based entrepreneurial development programme with objectives of building community capacity through facilitating new structural arrangements and increased entrepreneurial activity, and promoting civic and social entrepreneurship by fostering entrepreneurial norms and roles within risk-averse communities (Figure 1). The synergistic actions of the local EDGE advocates, which include the coalition of local leaders, the programme coordinator and the lead organization representative, result in the development of the community physical and social infrastructure and training of nascent and active entrepreneurs through the fourteen-week course. The synergism from the advocates' actions is, in turn, made manifest in the economic, civic and social entrepreneurship that occurs from the launching or improving of enterprises by trained and motivated entrepreneurs in a milieu of support from the physical and social infrastructure.

### **Action model verification**

Wilkinson (1970) provided a heuristic model of phases in an action process that arise in response to specific issues in the action course. The five phases are initiation and spread of interest (issue of awareness), organization of sponsorship (issue of organization), goal setting and strategy formulation (issue of decision-making), recruitment (issue of resource mobilization) and implementation (issue of resource application). Although we found similarity in the action phases of the organization and implementation of EDGE programmes, we also discovered action problems not captured in Wilkinson's model but critical to the success and sustainability of EDGE activities. We modified and expanded the model to seven phases. We now discuss each phase with reference to the EDGE programmes in the eight Nebraska communities.

### **Awareness**

Wilkinson (1970) combines awareness and interest in the first phase of an action process. Although that may apply to much of community action, for a new programme like EDGE with which residents of a community are not familiar, awareness and interest actually arise from separate issues in the action course. Research in the diffusion of innovations has shown that awareness of a new idea and an interest in acting upon that idea are conceptually and empirically distinct (Rogers, 1995). Motivation to act on a

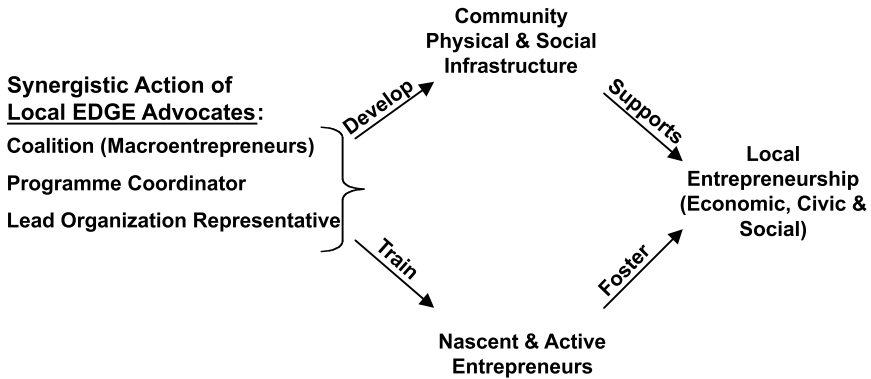


Figure 1 EDGE program model

problem does not necessarily follow awareness of the problem and its solution (Zaltman and Duncan, 1977). Therefore, in our model of community action for the EDGE programme, we separate awareness and interest into their own distinct phases.

*Awareness* addresses the issue of knowledge of the problem and that there is a solution. All respondents in the eight communities recognized some degree of economic problems their communities were suffering. They also perceived EDGE as having the potential to stimulate economic activity and thereby generate jobs and income. Diffusion of information about EDGE initially occurred through pilot programmes organized in 1993 in two communities on opposite ends of the state. Initial success of the pilot programmes led to state-wide promotion of EDGE to create awareness.

**Interest**

*Interest* addresses the issue of motivation to act upon the problem after achieving awareness of the problem and a potential solution. Despite broad dissemination of information on EDGE, a comparatively small number of communities (in relation to the total number in the state) actually became interested in implementing the programme. Respondents typically commented that they worked to organize and support the EDGE programme because they felt it would help the community both in assisting existing businesses to be more profitable and in creating new businesses. The extension system communicated the programme, but in most cases the lead organizing effort came from one person or a small group of individuals outside of extension with concern about the vitality of the community and its people. Their existing concern about community economic problems helped to motivate action upon learning about EDGE. Two communities

(which seemed to be building strong programmes), one moderately successful and one less successful, demonstrate the importance of the distinction between awareness and interest. When the founding coordinator in one and the founding lead organization representative in the other left the programme, their replacements had less interest in and gave lower priority to EDGE, and the programmes suffered.

## **Organization**

*Organization* addresses the issue of establishing the social structure for implementing the programme. Guidelines for participating communities focused on two critical elements of the structure. First, a programme coordinator needed to be recruited to ensure sufficient human resources for organizing and implementing the programme. Presumably, a coordinator paid to run the programme would be more likely to dedicate the necessary time and effort needed to achieve success than a volunteer.

Second, a broad-based coalition of local leaders and other interested individuals was to be organized. A flexible, dispersed leadership structure is a characteristic of entrepreneurial communities (Flora and Flora, 1990). The coalition was to be the source for local legitimation and for financial and other resources to support and promote the programme. Its broad base was to ensure that the programme represented the community field and would result in development of the community, that is, development of the community's problem solving structure. Therefore, in addition to achieving broad community representation, it was desirable to have community leaders in the coalition that sometimes are called macro-entrepreneurs (Schell and Davig, 1981). Formerly having been entrepreneurs themselves, macro-entrepreneurs understand the problems and needs related to new business ventures and work to establish a facilitative environment in the community for such efforts (Johannisson and Nilsson, 1989).

Each local programme also had a lead organization that was the responsible agency on the memorandum of understanding between the state organization and local programme. The degree of input from the lead organization into the local programme and the significance of that effort toward successful implementation varied widely across the eight sample communities.

## **Coordinator**

Our research indicates that the structure put in place in the organizational phase was strongly related to the eventual success of the programme, measuring success by longevity of the programme and continued support

by the local coalition. Two coordinator attributes seem to contribute substantially to programme success and longevity. The first is locally situated and committed leadership. The three communities with the most successful programmes all had this characteristic, though all leadership did not necessarily come from the paid coordinator. One of these communities actually had an absentee paid coordinator, but local legitimation and much of the day-to-day local effort necessary to keep the programme operating came from a representative of the lead organization, in this case extension. Another community with an absentee coordinator initially had a strong programme when the lead organization representative also was a strong supporter of EDGE. After the lead organization representative retired and the replacement gave EDGE a lower priority, local effort declined and so did programme vitality. In the two communities with the least successful programmes a coordinator was not hired. In one, the director of the local development district, the lead organization, managed the programme as an add-on to existing responsibilities. In the other the local chamber of commerce director managed the programme. These two communities also had problems relating to their coalitions and instructors.

The second important coordinator attribute is sufficient time and resources to do the job. The lack of sufficient resources as an obstacle was particularly evident in two of the moderately successful programmes. In one, the original coordinator was a highly motivated volunteer who had immediate success in implementation, but owing to the amount of time and energy necessary to maintain the programme could not sustain the effort. In the other, the coordinator was also the representative of the lead organization, and increasingly more of the coordinator's time and the organization's funds were being used for the programme's effort. Part of the problem here was ineffective use of the coalition.

## **Coalition**

Formation of a community coalition was a requirement for participating in EDGE. Again, communities differed in their strategies of organizing the coalition and using it to guide and support the programme. The three most successful programmes each had a strong broad-based, empowered coalition with a comprehensive role. The coalitions in these communities were active in supporting, promoting and guiding the programmes, and the coordinators encouraged their involvement in all programme activities. Even among these three programmes there were differences in organizational philosophy. Two communities had large coalitions (25–30 members) for broad-based representation and financial support. The other community used a more elitist approach with a small coalition (7–10 members) who

strongly supported the programme and had positions with businesses and organizations that allowed them to make substantial financial contributions. As the programme continued, however, even the latter community saw the wisdom of not relying on a small number of contributors and planned to expand the size of its coalition.

Two of the moderately successful EDGE programmes had large coalitions and the third had a small coalition. The two large coalitions both were strong at the beginning and successful at raising funds. In one community interest waned, however, when the bankers, the primary financial supporters, did not see any immediate payback in terms of being able to make loans to EDGE graduates starting new businesses. These coalition members apparently were not visionary leaders and did not have the characteristics of macro-entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the coalition was not empowered – the coordinator stated that too much effort and energy was needed to organize, use and maintain the coalition. In time, with the lack of involvement, many of the coalition's functions shifted to the coordinator. In the other large coalition community the coalition was supportive and met the programme's financial needs. With one or two exceptions, however, the members did not seem to have the time or commitment to be involved. The coordinator stated that there were no concerted efforts to empower the coalition to take ownership of the programme. One respondent from this community expressed concern that financial contributions might decline.

In the small coalition community, some of the problems may actually be attributed to extreme involvement by coalition members. In an effort to ensure no interest was slighted, coalition members were micro-managing the programme. One respondent stated that the coordinator needs to run the programme and the coalition needs to advise.

In the two least successful communities, no coalition was organized. Existing local boards, such as an extension advisory committee or economic development committee were used in lieu of a coalition to sanction the programme. In both communities the coordinator felt that organizing another group was unnecessary. As a result, the boards that served as coalitions were functional, but weak and not overly supportive of EDGE. The EDGE coordinators did not empower the board members, and the board members gave their attention to existing programmes they felt were more important.

## **Initiation**

*Initiation* addresses the issue of resource mobilization. Each programme receives a small grant from the state organization for each education cycle, and student tuition also helps to offset operating costs. It is the local organization's responsibility to raise the additional needed funds. These

funds come largely from coalition member contributions which provide a strong incentive for organizing a large, broad-based coalition. When the coordinator is a representative of the lead organization and the coalition is not engaged in the programme, the lead organization may contribute significantly to funding the programme.

The three most successful communities also were successful in raising matching funds. Two of these communities actually have regularly raised funds in excess of what was needed, and they have amassed a surplus to continue the programme should state funding cease. All three communities regularly rotate new members into the coalition to maintain fresh sources of funds.

In one of the moderately successful programmes funding was not a problem, but this could change because the coalition has relatively few members and they lack commitment. In another, lack of commitment and lack of a vision for the programme's contribution to community economic vitality resulted in a precipitous funding decline. As a result, the coordinator, who also was the lead organization representative, drew on continually larger amounts of funds from that organization. This EDGE programme eventually was discontinued because the lead organization was unwilling to continue to use its funds to support the programme. The third moderately successful community has not had a funding problem because surplus funds from another community project were initially available. As these funds are exhausted, however, other funding sources will need to be developed. This may be a problem because the existing coalition is small and consists primarily of public agency representatives.

Of the two least successful community programmes, one had no difficulty in obtaining funds through the coalition (the existing development board). But the programme operated for only two educational cycles, so it is difficult to determine whether the funding could have been sustained. No funds were requested of the coalition members in the other community, so this programme operated strictly on the state grants and student tuition. The lead organization contributed additional needed funds, which probably would not have been sustainable over time.

## Implementation

*Implementation* addresses the issue of resource application, or more specifically, hiring the instructor, recruiting students and teaching the classes. Not surprisingly, the most successful programmes were most pleased with their instructors. Successful instructors had academic credentials for teaching, but also had personal experience in operating a business or at least working in the business world. The most successful programmes were positive about

all their instructors. But all of the moderately successful and the least successful programmes each had at least one poor instructor. In one community, the instructor was also the coordinator and operated a business on the side. Respondents felt this coordinator had a lack of commitment.

## Confirmation

*Confirmation* addresses the issue of programme institutionalization. In the diffusion of innovations model the final stage is confirmation, which is a continuing evaluation of the appropriateness of using the innovation (Rogers, 1995). Similarly, EDGE programme communities decide annually whether or not to continue the programme based on the participant evaluations, perceptions of community impacts and resource availability. In the communities with successful programmes, the initial successes evidently were sufficiently impressive to institutionalize the programmes, and community leaders continue to hold positive perceptions.

An example of confirmation leading to disenfranchisement is the moderately successful programme in which the coordinator's organization assumed increasingly more of the financial responsibility over time. As the local bankers failed to perceive any return on their investment and lost interest, student recruitment also became more difficult, and finally the programme was dropped. The bankers apparently did not see any evidence confirming positive impacts for their banks or their communities, and therefore decided to end their financial support of EDGE. The least successful programmes did not have sufficient longevity to become institutionalized.

## Succession

*Succession* addresses the issue of programme continuity when there is a loss or change in a local programme's leadership, such as the departure of the coordinator or the lead organization's representative. Programmes need to establish some mechanism for continuity in leadership. Succession exists at two levels. One level is succession in the community support group – the local coalition. The coalition needs a good balance of continuity among stalwart groups along with a regular infusion of new ideas and energy to ensure the broad community representation and structure building.

The second level of succession relates to the key leaders who run the programme – the coordinator and lead organization representation. Programme activities diminished and in some cases ceased completely in programmes losing the key leader. One of the three most successful programmes abruptly terminated after five years because the coordinator, who also was the lead organization representative, was promoted and

transferred to another community. There was no one immediately available to assume leadership of the programme. A programme we classified as moderately successful could easily have been in the most successful category except for a change in lead organization representative. This community initially had an absentee coordinator who was committed to the programme. Problems surfaced when that person retired and the new representative gave low priority to EDGE. Both of the least successful programmes' demise was in a large part owing to lack of continuity in leadership.

## Discussion

We began with Wilkinson's (1970) phases in an action course that arise in response to specific action issues, and developed a modified model that more fully captures the action process of EDGE community programme initiation and implementation. Two structural elements are critical for a successful programme:

- 1 A locally based leader who believes in the programme, understands the community, and has sufficient time and commitment to devote to the effort. There are two key positions in a local programme's organization: the coordinator and the lead organization representative. In some communities the same person fills both positions, but they usually are different individuals. In some communities the coordinator does not live in the community. Although more than one model can lead to success, at least one of these positions needs to be occupied by a *locally based and committed leader*.
- 2 An actively participating, empowered and contributing coalition with members of broad community representation who believe in and support the programme. The two community programmes that did not organize a coalition did not fare well. In communities where the coalition was not active and empowered, the coalition members were not strongly supportive. The strongest programme support was in communities with an empowered and participating coalition.

The above two elements are absolutely vital to a successful EDGE community programme. The following also are extremely important, but they are more easily achieved if the above two elements are in place:

- 1 **A local funding base with broad community support.** To conserve funds some communities initially rely on volunteers to coordinate the programme or they draw upon the personnel and financial

resources of the lead organization. Although this may work initially, the programme cannot be sustained through such arrangements. Also, a broad funding base reduces the potential of placing a burden on any specific source of funds.

- 2 **A hired coordinator with commitment to the programme and sufficient time and financial resources to carry out the task.** The role of the coordinator is a major undertaking, and successful communities have been those with a paid and committed coordinator.
- 3 **A committed instructor with experience in operating a business as well as academic teaching credentials.** Weaker programmes had weaker instructors with little or no actual experience in the business world. Students found that it was difficult to relate to these instructors, resulting in poor evaluations and high dropout rates.
- 4 **Plans for maintaining leadership continuity in the coalition and coordinator.** Successful programmes are built upon the efforts of an involved coalition and a committed coordinator. Cycling new members into the coalition can keep it vital, but the loss of a committed coordinator still can be fatal to the programme. A strong coalition with a plan for succession may help overcome this problem.

Although EDGE is a programme with a primary goal of educating and developing support for entrepreneurs, we have stressed throughout this paper that an equally important goal is developing the infrastructure for good community development. To what degree is each of these goals actually achieved? Evaluations of the EDGE programmes have focused specifically on economic development and have consistently reported substantial numbers of new businesses and jobs created and existing businesses and jobs retained even with some discounting for optimistic inflation. Most of our respondents stated the programme's successes include both new businesses and ideas that were abandoned because the course helped the potential entrepreneur see that the ideas were not feasible or they did not have the commitment to see it through.

The community structure building/community development aspects of the programme did not come through quite as strong as economic development among our respondents, but it was recognized. One respondent who truly is a macro-entrepreneur and a coalition member of a most successful programme stated that from his perspective economic and community development are equally important, and a benefit of the programme is that it helps to '... create individuals who have a long term perspective and commitment'. Future programme evaluation should give more attention to the community development/structure building aspects.

## Conclusion

Transfer, implementation, and ownership of externally developed programmes to local communities present unique community development issues (Malia and Korsching, 1996). Many programmes fail because they are imposed on the community, whereas the community must request participation in EDGE and demonstrate a certain amount of commitment to the structure of the programme. But, as we have seen, even with an initial commitment to the programme extent of follow-through and level of eventual success can vary. Programme success among the eight communities was strongly related to the degree to which the issue at the heart of each of the seven phases received a response supportive of community capacity building.

Although the community action model we present comes out of the experiences of this specialized programme, it nevertheless has relevance for other community development or community action programmes that are driven by an internally recognized need but developed and in part supported by an external organization. Wilkinson's (1991) general model of community action upon which our model was built is itself based upon a long history of community action models going back to Kaufman's initial (1959) article in which he outlines stages of community action. Wilkinson's model does not differ significantly from Kaufman's five-stage model, and a long tradition of research between the two has demonstrated the relevance of the model to the unfolding of community action episodes. But therein also lie the weaknesses of the model. First, it is a model for temporally limited episodes or action courses rather than longer ongoing programmes. Through inclusion of the confirmation and succession phases in our model we explicitly recognize that a successful EDGE programme and other community development programmes with long-term goals are not discrete episodes or action courses. If successful, they do not have an identifiable end point. Second, the Wilkinson model assumes awareness and interest in relation to some potential action are part of the same phase. Yet for the community development practitioner, simply creating awareness within the community of a new programme will not necessarily create interest with motivation to act. Therefore, for community leaders to give a programme serious consideration, it must be packaged and promoted with sufficient appeal.

Beyond these specific differences in phases, our model goes beyond the general model to provide the community action or development practitioner some useful guidelines on what should occur and when in an overall scheme of the programme to increase potential for success. The overall model and specific concepts all have solid grounding in community development theory backed by considerable research. With some modification to suit the

particular situation, the model should be useful to most externally initiated programmes for an internally recognized need, from community health, to soil conservation, to nutrition education, to recommended farming practices. The overall goal is not only to address the specific needs, but also, in the process, to build a community structure with the capacity to address other issues and needs in the future.

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*Peter F. Korsching is a Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at Iowa State University.*

*Address for correspondence: pkorsch@iastate.edu*

*John C. Allen is Director of the Western Rural Development Center, and Professor, Department of Sociology, Social Work and Anthropology, Utah State University.*

*Address for correspondence: johna@ext.usu.edu*

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