



A Leadership Laboratory on the Future of the Northern Great Plains

FOUNDATION WORKSHOP

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Learning History

By Susan Sweitzer

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION | 4 |
| Origins..... | 4 |
| Purpose..... | 6 |
| Who..... | 7 |
| How..... | 8 |
| Brief Overview..... | 10 |
| EXPLORING CURRENT REALITY | 11 |
| The Land, the People and the Economy | 13 |
| The Role of Poverty, Race and Equality..... | 14 |
| Juggling differing perceptions of regional reality..... | 16 |
| Assumptions and Mental Models of the Future..... | 18 |
| Experiencing the Northern Great Plains – Learning Journeys..... | 20 |
| LEARNING AGENDA | 22 |
| CLOSING REFLECTIONS..... | 23 |
| Appendix A..... | 26 |
| Lab Team Members for the Foundation Workshop..... | 26 |
| Lab Secretariat | 26 |
| Appendix B..... | 28 |
| Map of the Current System..... | 28 |
| APPENDIX C..... | 31 |
| Trends | 31 |
| Appendix D..... | 32 |
| Mini-Learning Journey Reports..... | 32 |
| APPENDIX E..... | 41 |
| Learning Agenda..... | 41 |
| Appendix F..... | 43 |
| Meadowlark Leadership Lab Meetings | 43 |

INTRODUCTION

This first installment of the Learning History of the Meadowlark Leadership Laboratory was written upon completion of the Foundation Workshop at the Riverwood Center in Monticello, Minnesota, in July 2006. The Workshop was the first of five such gatherings planned over the course of a two-year project. The intention of this document is to use the words of the participants themselves—from the workshop and pre-workshop interviews—to describe the thinking and learning of the group at this stage in the process in order to support further reflection and learning as the work of the Meadowlark Lab goes forward.

This Learning History is an internal document intended for use only by participants in the Meadowlark Lab (members of the Lab Team, and Secretariat, and funders). It is not for distribution to the public.

Origins

The Meadowlark Leadership Lab arose from a growing recognition that creating a vibrant future in the northern Great Plains requires the resolution of long-standing problems, including rural decline, racism, youth migration from rural areas, loss of cultural identities, declining federal subsidies, and farm consolidation. The Meadowlark Project was designed to create a forum for leaders and stakeholders across the region to address the most pressing and significant issues that are preventing the region from achieving its desired future.

The Meadowlark Leadership Lab had its origins in July 2003 at the King Baudouin Foundation in Brussels, when members of the Northern Great Plains Inc. Board of Directors met with Johan Alleman and Alain Wouters. Johann and Alain shared their experience of using scenario planning to address long-standing conflicts in agriculture in Brussels. The conversation brought into stark relief the importance of social and environmental values in sparking regional vitality. At a subsequent meeting at the Generon offices in Massachusetts, Northern Great Plains Board members were introduced to the

Comments from Pre-Workshop Interviews:

“In this region, we have spent nearly 100 years trying to make rural life alive and vital. We are fighting a decline. My frustration is that maybe we aren’t asking the right questions, and need to start over. Meadowlark is a way to re-think what we are doing.”

idea of combining scenario planning with the U-Process, a methodology for enacting profound change in situations where long-standing problems have become entrenched.

As a result of that conversation, the Board of Northern Great Plains Inc. began to explore a variety of ideas for addressing the seemingly intractable problems contributing to decline in the Great Plains region. As they studied the many past efforts to address these issues and became more familiar with the U-Process, they became increasingly enthusiastic about the potential for applying that methodology in the northern Great Plains. Working with partners experienced with the U-Process at Sustainability Institute and Generon Consulting they decided to launch a project that involved a cross-sector of regional leaders and integrated the U-Process with a scenario planning approach.

Over the succeeding year and a half, Jerry Nagel and Melissa Sobolik of Northern Great Plains Inc. and colleagues at Sustainability Institute interviewed dozens of critical thinkers in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa and Minnesota and invited individuals to join the Lab Team. The intention was to bring together committed leaders in the region to design four pilot projects that would demonstrate innovative approaches to shaping the future of the region. The hope was that by bringing together the efforts of people with widely diverse understandings of the issues imbedded in the region, these pilots would create new opportunities, release new energies, attract new investment and draw new people to the region.

In conversations and interviews conducted over the course of assembling the Lab Team, interviewees identified a variety of **challenges** that the project needs to address in order to transform the future of the northern Great Plains region. Topics which will be part of the ongoing dialogue of the project include:

- Attitudes toward the land—including land ownership, productivity, and use
- The role of the environment—the impact of global warming, water availability, and resource stewardship

Comments from Pre-Workshop Interviews:

“Out-migration is the issue for my age group and younger; we leave and never come back. I moved to California and came back. I wish others had the courage to admit that it is OK to come home.”

“For the African Americans, U.S. policy has been one of exclusion—keeping them separate, denying rights. For Native People it has been one of inclusion—trying to get us ‘included’ in U.S. policy. For the new immigrants it has been a policy of both inclusion (‘come and take these jobs’) and exclusion (‘Go home.’

- Youth—identifying what “opportunity” means for young people leaving the region
- Race—the role it plays historically and currently
- Poverty—an issue in all states in the region
- “Smart growth” and urban sprawl—how this might be managed or guided to benefit the region as a whole
- Access—to healthcare and education
- Bio-fuels—their role in the long- and short-term future of the region

You are putting too much of a burden on our social systems’).”

“Another challenge is the division between those who have and don’t have wealth—the loss of the middle class. There is little middle class. Like there are no medium-sized farms. You lose the middle class and you lose the P.T.A. and all that.”

“My husband’s grandmother died this spring at 92, in a nursing home. At the end of her life she wasn’t being taken care of by family. A lot is similar to what our new American immigrant population is dealing with. I hear their stories about what it is to lose a place and connections—siblings, parents, children scattered all over the world.”

Team Members set the stage for this workshop by identifying these regional challenges and by calling for new ways to think about solutions. They frequently mentioned the need to move beyond old ways of thinking about solutions in regard to these challenges.

Distilling the hopes and visions for the future of the region that emerged from these interviews, Jerry Nagel, Melissa Sobolik, and their colleagues at Sustainability Institute put forth an initial convening question for the Meadowlark Leadership Laboratory:

“As a national government, can we afford to keep these tiny towns afloat? How is federal investment spent? If this town serves no public purpose except a place for people to live, how do you rebuild a whole town? We have more paid government officials per capita than anywhere else.”

What will it take for the northern Great Plains to be a place of opportunity for all people?

Purpose

Based on advice and experience gleaned from many initial interviews and meetings, the Meadowlark Project established three overall objectives. First, the group will develop four or five pilot projects that demonstrate how the region can make deep changes in the way the regional society thinks and the economy functions. Second, the project will establish an ongoing social network of diverse leaders who have become agents of change, thus helping to create the trends that will

“The deep history of this region is that something bad always happens. When I work with people in my community, I talk about the power to imagine and the right to dream. History has taken away from us

determine the region's future. Third, through ongoing public dialogue connected to the work of the Leadership Laboratory, the project will generate new public awareness of future scenarios for the region and of policies and practices that will support the northern Great Plains in reaching its fullest potential.

that right to dream. Our goal is to take back the right to dream in our communities."

Although *opportunity for all* is at the heart of this work, the group realizes that perspectives on what it means to be "a place of opportunity" differ substantially among the institutions, businesses, and communities represented in the Lab. As a starting point, the Meadowlark Lab considers this phrase to include, at the broadest level, strong communities and local economies built on good schools, access to medical care, an ability to generate income and wealth, inclusiveness, responsible environmental stewardship, and an effective infrastructure.

The Meadowlark Lab Team will examine key issues affecting the region now and in the near future, including how to encourage the growth of renewable energy, create economic opportunities for small towns, combat poverty and racial divisions, link environmental responsibility with sustainable income, and replace drug use and violence with hope and productive livelihoods.

Who

The Meadowlark Project brings together committed, influential leaders who care deeply about the economic, social, and environmental future of the northern Great Plains and want to work together to foster long-term, systemic change in the region.

The Lab Team is composed of individuals from five states and multiple sectors who have expressed an openness to seeing things in new, creative ways, are committed to building a positive future, and represent important voices in the regional dialogue.

These individuals embody a wide range of experience and expertise in industry, education, agriculture, health care, social services, business, politics, cultural issues, rural issues, and environmental and social policies. The group includes those who represent sectors of society that are often left out of

"Understandings are complementary. This project will need the 'knowings' of many different people. As soon as you get people together from different tribes, they

the mainstream.

ask each other, 'How do you know?'
Knowledge is specific to place."

The Secretariat offers professional support for the Lab and is provided by Northern Great Plains, Inc., and Sustainability Institute. Specific design and process support is provided by Generon Consulting and Susan Stickley from Stratus, Inc.

Northern Great Plains, Inc. (NGP) is a not-for-profit research, demonstration and convening organization. NGP Inc. focuses its work on futures studies, creating economic opportunity, and supporting a healthy environment and vital communities.

Sustainability Institute (SI) is a non-profit research and consulting group that uses systems analysis and organizational learning to help a broad array of organizations become more strategic. Generon Consulting is an international process-consulting firm with extensive experience in tri-sector dialogue and action. Stratus is a strategic process consultancy that designs and facilitates transformational learning experiences for organizations and communities.

How

The design of this Lab is based on methods for deep innovation that have been developed and applied over the last 20 years by a group of action researchers now associated with the Society for Organizational Learning, the Presencing Institute, and Generon Consulting. The twenty-four-month Meadowlark project will integrate the U-Process and scenario planning in a process that includes workshops, learning journeys, and public dialogues. In addition, the Lab Team will develop scenarios for the future of the northern Great Plains, facilitate public engagement with these potential futures, and use this public dialogue to inform the development of pilot projects to test innovative approaches to shaping the future of the region.

The U-Process is characterized by three phases: diverging, emerging, and converging. The initial workshop of the Meadowlark Project focused primarily on the *diverging* phase—that of exploring the varied perspectives and priorities within the team in order to understand the complexity of the current reality in the northern Great Plains. Subsequent workshops will focus on the *emerging* phase—that of seeing

what sense can be made of the complexity—and the *converging* phase, in which the group’s prior work coalesces into practical initiatives. The U-Process is most effective in situations, such as those problems facing the northern Great Plains, that exhibit high *dynamic, social, and generative complexity*.

Dynamic complexity occurs when cause and effect are separated in space and time. For example, determinations about land tenure and agricultural practices made 20 years ago affect current opportunities.

Generative complexity occurs when the situation itself is fundamentally unfamiliar. Old solutions may no longer be useful in our age of globalization, new technology, new communications, and new networks. In an unfamiliar situation, using the best practices from the past won’t necessarily solve the problems.

Finally, high *social complexity* is evident when influential people in the system have fundamentally different views of what is going on, and about what matters. In such situations, it is critical to engage the participation of a diverse group of stakeholders in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of current reality and to identify significant leverage points for change.

Scenario planning, the other cornerstone of the Meadowlark Project, is a tool that has been effectively used in business environments as a way to see complex interrelationships and apply systems thinking in the creation of business strategies. It can be used for resolving local and national conflicts, or for helping a locality, region, or nation think strategically about its future.

Scenarios are plausible stories or narratives that describe alternative paths toward the future. They are not projections, predictions or preferences, but powerful tools for stimulating thinking about future possibilities. The process of building and developing scenarios helps identify key pressure points or effective levers for systemic change—a primary objective of the Meadowlark Project.

Team Member Comments during Foundation Workshop:

“I hope we don’t become so overwhelmed by the complexity of what we face that these projects seem insignificant. If they fail, I hope they are spectacular failures. And I hope we persevere and that the barriers don’t take away from the momentum of the work.”

“When I think of assumptions and infrastructure, I know that the cultural lens through which mainstream society sees is very different from the Native world view.”

Brief Overview

The remainder of this history will discuss the content of the workshop sessions in the Foundation Workshop, the group dynamics that support and feed the spirit of the Lab, and the research agenda that emerged in the workshop, which will inform the ongoing work of the group.

The work of the Lab Team in this initial phase of the project focused mainly on developing a collective understanding of the current reality of the northern Great Plains. The plenary sessions of the Foundation Workshop provided a framework for exploring a broad range of ideas and perspectives on important issues and trends (see *A Map of the Current System*, Appendix B, page 28.) The understanding of current reality was further deepened through small-group sessions and Mini-Learning Journeys (see *Learning Journey Reports*, Appendix D, page 32), as well as discussions related to how different members of the Lab Team experienced the workshop, particularly in terms of the challenges arising from culturally differing perspectives.

Near the end of the Foundation Workshop, the Lab Team outlined a *Learning Agenda* (Appendix E, page 41) that will guide the work to be done between this workshop and the January Scenario Retreat. The Learning Agenda focuses on the people and places Team Members want to learn more about before they embark on developing scenarios for the future of the region.

Over the course of the Foundation Workshop, the Lab Team recognized that there are considerable differences in how Team Members view key details of the necessary elements of a positive future for the region. For example, Lab Team members interpreted the importance of racial and cultural diversity very differently. Some Members see these issues as essential to the strategic development of the region, while others see them as peripheral. Similarly, Team Members regard the ownership of land, resources, and material comforts from very different points of view. For example, some Team Members explained that defining one's economic well-being according to how much land, money, goods or resources one owns *individually* is not part of their tradition. One Team

Team Member Comments during Foundation Workshop:

"I have not felt this is a forum where I have to inhibit who I am personally and professionally. It seemed like a given when I walked in the door that you wanted to experience me at all levels and see what I experience from both sides as a person who has not had all the opportunities and privileges of being a resident of the northern Great Plains."

"Working with a group that is trying to help people is interesting. We believe we can solve our own problems but we believe poor people can't solve their problems so 'need' us to help."

"We native people are grounded and connected to the land; we understand time in a different way. That we recognize natural time gives us a big leg up. Building relationships takes time. The heart of the native paradigm is

Member shared the perspective that human beings are equal to, but not greater than, any other living thing, which implies a world view in which domination in the form of ownership is not natural.

From the outset, Lab Team members indicated an interest in exploring these divergent aspects of how individual members of the Lab Team interpret the phrase “creating a place of opportunity.” A key question for this Lab Team may be whether differing world views can be sufficiently understood, respected, and experienced to contribute positively to the development and presentation of scenarios.

Less tangibly, but equally important, a broader appreciation developed in the group with regard to the nature of their own assumptions about the future of the region. Although there was only nominal indication of shifting assumptions over the course of the workshop, the process of identifying and naming them was illuminating for many.

By the final day of the Foundation Workshop, many Lab Team Members shared their hope for significant system change, even while recognizing the magnitude of the challenges facing the region. The comments of many Team Members indicate an appreciation for what became a shared set of questions and challenges to be explored in the coming months. In addition, a number of people expressed surprise at how much they learned. They attributed this to the depth of knowledge and range of experience present in the Lab Team, as well as to the widely shared sense of a unique connection to place in this geographic region.

relationship. What is truly challenging is to live in relationship with all relations. Humans are not special, they are only equal.”

“What is poverty? Our whole value system is based on sharing. Traditionally we are not trained to gather and hold for one’s self but to gather for the good of group.”

“A cultural disconnect exists between Native and Western world views that is not visible.”

Team Member Comment in Final Workshop Session:

“I am grateful to be involved in the Meadowlark Project and I look forward to this incredible journey that holds so many possibilities yet to be discovered.”

EXPLORING CURRENT REALITY

The Meadowlark Lab has intentionally convened a group that sees things from the perspective of different geographies, sectors, and histories in order to enrich the collective ability of the group to imagine positive futures for the region. One of the primary challenges in bringing together people with this range of diversity is how to use these differences as a catalyst for achieving significantly greater understanding rather than polarizing across cultural, racial or geographic differences.

On the first day of the workshop, Team Members compiled a list of the most important issues to be addressed by the Lab. This revealed numerous, sometimes contradictory, definitions of the problems facing the region. But it also served, nonetheless, to build a foundation of understanding about some concrete aspects of current reality. The list of issues developed by the team falls into the following broad categories:

- Economic Vitality
- Mindset and Culture
- Access to Services
- Distribution of Wealth
- Changing Social Capital
- Politics
- Physical Resources
- People
- Managing Change

A more comprehensive explanation of these broad topic areas can be found in *Map of the Current System*, Appendix B, page 28. These same topics were identified as trends that were indicative of the general direction of the region in the coming years (see *Trends*, Appendix C, page 31).

In the initial plenary discussions, Team Members identified two underlying themes that were key to the group's ability to work together on the substantive issues before them. The first was the need for a common understanding and language for addressing cultural differences and conflicting world views. Several Lab Members called for extensive discussion of this topic, suggesting that without such understanding it would be difficult to create significant practical initiatives. The other underlying theme was the shared connection to place that underpins a regional-wide sense of unique identity. This was viewed as an attribute that could bind the group together, despite other differences.

Team Members Explain their Contributions to the Issues Exercise:

"How do we leverage our resources? Like utilizing crops, land, and water? How do we present these from a value perspective rather than being perceived as a needy region?"

"How do we insure the resources are spread throughout region?"

"Wealth is both a problem and an opportunity. The transfer of cultural knowledge, land, and home ownership is happening rapidly and often transfers out of the region. There is no direct connection to the land, and that is essential for this region. It was once taken for granted."

Team Member Comments:

"...we come with different hopes and perspectives and there isn't any right or wrong perspective. Only when we share in a truthful way what we see and our fears will we have some collective vision for the future."

"This can be a harsh and challenging place to live. It is also a most beautiful place in a particularly unique way. The beauty comes not from grand vistas of mountains or forests or deserts, but from a certain way that the prairies seep into you and become a part of your marrow."

The Land, the People, and the Economy

At the most general level, Team Members indicated a need to address **social, natural resource, and economic** dimensions of opportunity in the northern Great Plains. That being said, Lab Team members expressed markedly differing perspectives on the relative importance of each of these three dimensions. For example, some Members stressed that the environment is in dangerous decline and is the most important priority for action if the region is to survive the next century. Others described the economic challenges for all sectors of the population in the region as the most immediate problem to be addressed—including, but not confined to, the loss of a vital rural economic base. Still others indicated that the loss of either Native culture or rural culture would be an unrecoverable loss and must be taken into consideration if other dimensions are to be effectively addressed.

When discussing the **economic** dimension of current reality there was consensus on:

- The degree to which this is a problem across nearly all sectors of the populace
- The necessity of revitalizing the economic base in the region
- The need to examine the relationship between financial capital, natural resource use, and social capital.

The relationship between financial and social capital was identified as particularly significant in charting scenarios for the future of the region. However, the notion that land, water, minerals, and soil are resources which rightfully should contribute to the economic future of the region was not shared by all sectors represented in the Lab. Many Native cultures and a number of non-Native traditions see the natural world as a living, sacred entity which cannot be owned or sold and should not be exploited for economic gain. How these differing experiences will inform the work of developing scenarios remains one of the open questions for the Lab Team.

Although Team Members frequently spoke about the need for

Team Member Comments:

“We need an economic engine to create opportunities. This isn’t a social program—there needs to be a self-sustaining economic payoff.”

“...in the end it is about how to count the intangibles and public benefits to the whole region. It is an economic equation in the end.”

“Economics is an art. If you can come up with an equation that shows how investment in education and social services benefit the economy, then you have something. People know intuitively the relationship between economics, community, and social benefits, but don’t know how to talk about market failures, tariffs, trade, and cost-benefit analysis. It’s two different languages. This world is run by economists and by the market.”

“The most critical issue we face is how

the region to develop in such a way as to avoid depleting the natural and **environmental** resources of the Great Plains, there were many comments that indicated a lack of consensus around the following questions:

- How critical are environmental problems?
- Will the potential of bio-fuels create possibilities for the region or will it repeat the resource depletion of past regional “booms?”
- What is the relative importance of environmental problems compared to other issues, particularly issues of equity?

Although there was general agreement that preserving the natural resource base of the region was essential to a vibrant future, perceptions about the appropriate strategy to pursue or the relative importance of this aspect of the region were distinctly varied.

Lastly, Team Members articulated many perspectives about **social** issues as they relate to the history, the present reality, and the future potential of the region. Within the Lab Team and across the region there are differing viewpoints on the significance of these issues, whether or not they are inevitable, and the potential for the Meadowlark Project to affect them. Social issues that seemed immediately critical to the Lab Team were:

- Access to services: health services, technology, education, art and cultural activities
- A regional social climate which tolerates racism, sexism, and ageism
- Increasing class disparity, i.e. the distance between the have’s and have-not’s

The Role of Poverty, Race, and Equality

One of the persistent themes of the workshop was a concern about the “have-not’s”—people essentially left out of the

we use or view our natural resources—ownership, use rights, water, and land.”

“Soil is the foundation of this region’s past, present, and future.”

“I believe that advances in renewable energy will be good for the region economically and environmentally.”

“Natural resources should be protected. High land values mean access is limited and there are barriers to entry [ownership]. It is essential that we use our natural resources well. We would do well to promote the bio-economy as a part of who we are.”

Team Member Comments:

“There’s an assumption about what poverty is. It would help the project to have others [white people] go out and learn about poverty. If the learning changed them, it would bring more diversity to the problem.”

Team Member Comments:

“My feeling is that my community wants

regional economy. For some, this group was defined by poverty, while for others the criteria included access to land or cultural oppression as a result of race or ethnicity.

While all agreed that the future of the region included old and new immigrants and Native peoples, not all felt that the issues of race, class, poverty, and a history of oppression needed to be addressed in order to develop scenarios for an inclusive future for the region. For this group, economic vitality was at the heart of a positive future, and the responsibility for solving poverty and racial injustice was seen as a political or social problem rather than an economic issue. For other Members of the Lab, considering issues of oppression, class prejudice, racism, and inequity in economic opportunity is not optional—these issues are the reality of daily experience for many in the region. The disparity between these experiences within the Meadowlark Lab Team is both a significant barrier and one of the teams' greatest potential strengths.

Some Lab Team members indicated skepticism about the possibility of achieving open regional dialogue, deep learning, and positive change, in part due to the potential for polarization in a group this diverse.

At the same time that these issues were put forth, some Team Members expressed concern that the agenda of the Meadowlark Project might become too big to be accomplished and too personally challenging to be palatable to some Members. One Member cautioned that the culture of the region included an aversion to risk, and that too much exploration of issues of difference might not be tolerable for many Members of the Lab.

The issues associated with poverty, racism, class, and oppression were woven throughout the session on current reality, and began to be recognized as a complex challenge in the minds of many Lab Team members. A few participants indicated that developing a shared understanding of individual differences (including worldviews and cultures) and a shared language for talking about difference were crucial work for the Lab Team. Several Members voiced the opinion that working through issues of race, class, and ethnicity in the Meadowlark Team itself would enrich the ability of the team to address similar institutional and systemic issues in the region.

to hear that I am doing things that are of practical use to them. It isn't just about poverty; there is just so much time I can spend and what I do has to make sense to my community."

"At the risk of being voted off the island, I sense we are obsessed about equality and diversity, and it is worth being concerned about but my experience has been a concern about quality..."

"...for me the Latino community is my life and it [diversity] isn't a choice to think about it. It is my reality in my heart and mind and it is special. That is where I live. I have the option of living other places and that is what I call home."

"I don't believe we can fix racism, but we can provide education and experiences to others so hopefully ignorant people can become informed."

"I don't know if it's Scandinavian culture or farmer culture, but around here many are risk-averse. They want to see corn in the bin."

Team Member Comments:

"There is an implication that if we are identified as people of color, we have experienced poverty."

"Poverty seems like a cross-cutting issue: poverty is part of history, education, access to capital."

"I think the group really needs to tackle racism and cultural differences. I also think the group needs to have a thoughtful

As occurred with many discussions during the workshop, some degree of initial polarization on this topic gave way to a growing collective appreciation for the complexity of the problem. Team Members repeatedly referred to race, equality, and distribution of wealth as key concerns, and some shared their deep, personal commitment to these problems. As a result, these concerns seemed to take on a new significance within the Team. The different perspectives were not reconciled, but in the closing plenary session several Team Members voiced a sense of shared recognition of the importance of these concerns for the region.

discussion about age and generational differences that I think are impacting the region.”

“Racism isn’t personal; it’s systemic. Racism didn’t arise this morning; it’s been here forever. We have the opportunity to examine systems in different ways. White people hopefully won’t always count on people of color to bring it up.”

“Diversity is a necessary precondition for making progress.”

Juggling Differing Perceptions of Regional Reality

Because this project is expressly about fostering changes that will create a new future for the region, insights relating to managing change are of particular significance for the group. Even before the group convened, in pre-workshop interviews, Members indicated that deeply held attitudes about change among those living in the northern Great Plains were a primary challenge facing the region.

Pre-workshop Interview Comments:

“In small towns it is the inherent mindset that change is not good.”

“I fear we are not adapting to change and not capitalizing on it.”

Many expressed concern about the intentions and/or willingness of whole sectors of the population in the region to change. This unwillingness was attributed, to varying degrees, to the culture of the region (rural, small-town, Midwestern) and to the physical experience of living there (enduring harsh, long winters and the physical trials of living on the Plains).

“There is a lot of judgment. Maybe our biggest thing is how to have the dialogue before the crisis or event occurs. How do you have a discussion of what you want to be before Wal-Mart or the pig farmer shows up? If we are looking at how to populate this region, it isn’t going to be old white ladies like me who do it.”

Several Lab Members questioned the ability of this group or any group to affect significant change in the region. For these Members a sense of the inevitability of decline in the region was evident.

Additionally, some Team Members expressed their concern that they are not powerful enough individually to accomplish the changes they feel are needed. Team Members representing very different sectors and institutions shared this frustration.

Opening Remarks:

A number of people used the word “impossible” in regard to the magnitude of the change needed in the region. Others saw this challenge as particularly interesting and indicated that the diversity in the Lab Team contributed to their sense of

“It is always a question I have when I embark on any project where I am trying to change something, create something: Do I have the influence and authority?”

potential for creating positive change.

The Issues Exercise contributed to a developing sense among Members of the depth and breadth of the current challenges facing the region. In a number of areas, Team Members entered this project expecting to confront historically polarized positions, such as those between differing cultural groups in the region, between small/medium-sized producers and agribusiness interests, and between outside investors and those committed to retaining profit on investment within the region.

Adam Kahane of Generon Consulting, one of the facilitators of the workshop, reminded the Team that in the diverging phase of the “U” process there is no expectation of resolving differences and also that highly complex problems are difficult to solve by simply applying old solutions. His comments served to support the emerging shared recognition within the Lab Team of the desirability of sharing honestly across differences and gathering information and research on these topics for further consideration at subsequent workshops.

Although the work of the Lab Team in the Foundation Workshop brought forward many of these differing perspectives, Team Members noted both a determination not to shy away from the thorny conversations about difference and a genuine intention to respect and learn across these complicated divides.

Several questions emerged as critical for the group to consider as it works together in the coming months:

- How much understanding across differences is necessary and desirable for successful regional change projects?
- Is it possible for successful innovations to shift the system on a regional scale?
- How do we ensure that the voices at the edges remain in the dialogue?

These questions will inform the group’s work of creating practical initiatives together. The Foundation Workshop initiated new relationships that have the potential to make a difference, although this workshop marked only the beginning

Team Member Comments During the Workshop:

“We don’t want all the people of color being the only ones having to deal with the topic of racism.”

“It reminded me of the reality of the Great Plains— all the behavior exhibited, the fear or dismissal of diversity, and the limited thinking applied to issues. It also reminded me of how some efforts need to begin.”

“We just experienced the Great Plains and that is the Great Plains. You often find a person of color talking to a group of non-color. What will it take for us to make it work? We [in Meadowlark] will be modeling what we are doing. Maybe we have to get the Great Plains to hold hands and pay attention to what we are doing.”

Team Member Comments during Closing Round of Foundation Workshop:

“I am more aware of the diversity of issues out there and think I am more in tune with the needs of the diverse population in the Great Plains. I don’t know exactly what to do with that, but I do think it’s a step in the right direction.”

“I want you to know about me. It is my responsibility to make the offering to you so you know who I am and why I feel and act as I do. It is your responsibility to

of the project and revealed many chasms yet to be bridged.

learn. If we have that dialogue and we are open, things will be better.”

Assumptions and Mental Models of the Future

As the experience of current reality in the northern Great Plains began to take shape for the Lab Team, they deepened their understanding of that reality by delving into assumptions which shape their thinking. Identifying assumptions—particularly those that could be critical in determining the future of the region—is an essential precursor to scenario design.

To help participants uncover and identify previously unquestioned assumptions, small groups were invited to articulate one question about the future whose answer they felt would best inform strategies for creating a region of opportunity. Those questions revealed for the group a number of key assumptions that have the potential to significantly influence the way they think about the future of the region.

One group posed a question focused on the region’s relationship to energy production. *“What will be the top three energy sources in the post-oil economy in which the northern Great Plains can participate?”* Some of the assumptions behind this question were identified by the group as:

- There will be a post-oil economy.
- Energy production technology will continue to advance.
- Advances through renewable energy will benefit the region.
- Global warming will have a negative impact.
- Other energy sources will emerge.

While the group felt that some of these assumptions were probable enough to be used to drive scenario planning, some were not commonly held. Those about which there was disagreement became subjects for further research in the Learning Agenda.

Team Member Comments:

“I felt a great burden of responsibility to be asking one question for the region.”

“I believe global warming will impact the environment but will catalyze activism. The agricultural economy will then shift and drive other economic developments and those will be driven by technology and innovation.”

Two other groups developed questions that focused on the essential nature of identifying and working for the common good. These were combined into the following unifying question: *“How do we move the hearts and souls of people in the region to work toward a shared sense of the greater common good with united purposes?”* The assumptions identified behind this question were:

- We can define the common good.
- People want to be part of a community.
- Change is desired.
- It will be possible to open a dialogue.

“I came to realize that I know less and less what could [affect] the future. I became more aware of how much we need to know to have a realistic picture.”

Three other questions focused primarily on identifying the demographics of the future population of the northern Great Plains and addressing the needs of different populations, including the need for an identity connected to the region. *“In the future, what events will affect human needs? In 20 years, who will live in the northern Great Plains? What will be the source of people’s identity?”* Team Members identified their own assumptions embedded in those questions as:

- World political change will impact the region.
- Public policy will solve problems.
- Identity matters.
- There will be increased urbanization and a decrease in rural populations, except for Native American communities, which will thrive.
- There will be increased diversity in the region.
- The human condition will improve through more social justice and increased social capital.
- Consumerism leads to conflict and war.

Team Member Comments:

After the exercise, several Members of the Lab Team commented on the variety of assumptions that were surfaced and the challenge in determining which of those were critical to explore over the course of understanding possible futures.

“We have to accept other people’s questions as a gift to think about.”

In addition, many acknowledged that the level of expertise and culturally different experiences embodied in the Team creates both enormous opportunity and a challenge to extend the boundaries of “knowing” for the group. Many Members of the group were familiar with the difficulty of maintaining curiosity and an attitude of learning in the face of long-standing assumptions.

“You don’t know what you don’t know.”

“I found myself slipping into knowing rather than questioning. It’s a safer mode that I’m used to operating in.”

In both small-group sessions and plenary sessions, Team Members expressed appreciation for the attitude of openness to learning and respectful listening that developed around contradictory and differing assumptions. Many also voiced surprise at their own deepening awareness of the rich cultural complexity in the region and in the Meadowlark Lab Team.

“Primarily, it has made me more attentive to issues in the region and more alert to potential conflicts between development and, for example, human rights and environmental needs.”

Experiencing the Northern Great Plains – Learning Journeys

Moving from intellectually *knowing about* a regional issue to *experiencing* the nuances of that issue was the focus of six Mini-Learning Journeys organized on the second day of the workshop. Adam Kahane explained that an essential aspect of the Learning Journey as it is used in the U-Process involves suspending assumptions sufficiently to become curious about the experience encountered on the journey. He challenged the Lab Team to experiment with this approach to learning.

Team Member Comments Following the Learning Journeys:

“This is a powerful way of understanding what is going on.”

The Meadowlark Lab Team divided into six groups, each of whom was asked to be open to gaining new perspectives on the region by visiting local people involved in culturally centered community businesses or community development activities. (See *Learning Journey Reports*, Appendix D page 32, for individual reports.)

“Learning Journeys are not about what we care about. They’re about what we need to learn about and bring back to the group.”

The Learning Journeys centered around four distinctive communities in Minneapolis.

One group visited the Little Earth of United Tribes Housing Corporation, whose mission is to provide Members of the American Indian community and all Little Earth residents with an opportunity to live cooperatively together in safe, secure, attractive, and affordable homes. Three non-profits own the project, where thirty-eight different tribes are represented in

“The Little Earth Housing project, which preferences qualifying Native Americans, was an attempt to build a small town in the middle of a large city. Some of us were surprised at how nice it was. Many of the children had had no sense of their cultural history, but now they were

the 212 housing units. Native American language courses are offered at a learning center across the street, and there are plans to build a school and a food coop.

learning to speak their Native American language at a learning center across the street.”

Another group visited the Hmong Cultural Center, whose mission is to enhance the personal development of children, youth, and adults through Hmong Cultural education, while providing resources that contribute to cross-cultural understanding between Hmong and non-Hmong people. There is a long-established Hmong culture in Minneapolis as a direct result of a 1975 public invitation from state legislators to the Hmong, who helped the U.S. during the Vietnam War.

“I was surprised to learn that the Social Justice movement in Minneapolis had started in the Catholic Church.”

Two groups visited Somali Malls—the Karmel Mall and the Village Market—sponsored through the African Development Center. These malls contain dozens of Somali-owned shops in a wide variety of booths, much like an open-air market.

“I was surprised that the Somalis seemed to be making a comfortable transition to such a cold climate. They had established their cultural group and the mall was neat, clean, and safe...”

Finally, two Meadowlark groups visited two major Latino marketplaces established by the Latino Economic Development Center, which assists immigrants in rural Minnesota to develop new businesses. One was a cooperative catering to a Latino clientele, while the second, the Global Market Place, had evolved into an all-nations neighborhood market with small businesses serving clientele from a variety of ethnic origins. (The reports from these two Learning Journeys have not been received at this time.)

“One of my take-away’s from visiting the Latino community: I saw a community that was rough, but in the center there was friendliness and quality.”

The mini-Learning Journeys sparked lively discussions in small groups around issues that had not been specifically addressed in plenary discussions: the role of Somali women as business leaders, the attitudes of respect and protection for U.S. military servicemen in the Hmong community, the paradox in the Little Earth community of gaining increasing influence over some legislation while simultaneously becoming the target of other less-than-welcome legislative actions.

“The mini-learning journeys were a highlight of the experience and I wish we would have had more time to ‘debrief’ as a team and then collectively as a group to further explore our assumptions and beliefs.”

Through these concrete experiences in communities that were not familiar to many Lab Members, the Team connected with specific aspects of the changing demographics and cultures in the region. Many felt that the Learning Journeys prepared the ground for future engagement with the underlying issues, unspoken assumptions, and possible scenarios for the region. A great many Lab Members commented that the visits to

culturally focused businesses and communities in Minneapolis were highlights of the workshop experience. In the coming months, each Lab Member will have the opportunity to expand this experience by joining others on one of several four-day Learning Journeys in the region, each facilitated by the Secretariat Team.

LEARNING AGENDA

On the third day of the Foundation Workshop, the Lab Team developed a Learning Agenda by identifying the most important questions before them. Topic-oriented Learning Teams agreed to research and learn about each of these areas of interest and bring information back to the larger group at the Scenario Retreat in January 2007.

Details of the Learning Agenda can be found in Appendix E, page 41. The broad topic areas below offer a sense of the emerging directions for the future work of the Lab Team:

Understanding our States will focus primarily on trends in education, population, healthcare, transportation, and infrastructure.

“I’d like a description of the distribution across the region of infrastructure and assets—roads, universities, hospitals, water, electricity, and so forth.”

Culture and History will concentrate on gathering data on changing realities for reservations, family farms, and businesses. It will also examine the role of different cultural histories in imagining the future and the role of nature in different cultures.

“What types of historical and cultural trends exist in the northern Great Plains? I am thinking of weather patterns, demographic shifts, cultural influences, and historical data.”

Education will research the impact of consolidation on rural areas, the role of community and technical colleges in growth, and graduation rates across the region.

“How do states determine basic education elements across the northern Great Plains?”

Current Social Issues will focus on racism, political and cultural differences on the Lab Team, generational motivators, implications of religious differences in the region, and understandings of social justice.

“I’d like to get some clarity about our personal and team values, visions, resources, and expectations.”

The group exploring **Models** will concentrate on case studies of thriving communities, risk-taking leaders who have credibility in the region, and parallel projects in other U.S. regions.

“Who are the risk-taking leaders who have credibility and why do they have credibility?”

The **Economy and Global Market** team will study economic, agricultural, and tourism trends, socially responsible capitalism, corporate investment in the Great Plains, and transfer and distribution of wealth in the region.

“Can we identify needs in the global and national market and then look for competitive advantages to this region for filling those needs?”

The **Poverty** group will explore housing, the economy, rural communities, and how poverty is related to history, education, and access to capital in the region.

“There’s an assumption about what poverty is. We want people of other backgrounds to be part of this conversation. It would help the project to have others go out and learn about poverty.”

Natural Resources will research renewable energy, regional natural resource reserves, and the effects of natural resources on regional commerce, recreation, and preservation.

“Is there alignment between current natural resources and projections?”

Access to Capital will focus on financing in rural areas and identifying, coordinating, and accessing capital resources.

“What are the gaps in financing economic activities in rural areas and what needs to be done to maintain livelihoods in region?”

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

The Foundation Workshop does not stand alone, but is one chapter in the development of an innovative approach to addressing the future of the northern Great Plains. Between workshops, and in subsequent sessions, the project will build on the information, process, and relationships that were launched in the initial workshop.

Team Member Comments:

Several questions have emerged from the Foundation Workshop that summarize the central challenges facing the Lab Team as the work of the Meadowlarks Project goes forward:

“I hope we do things in this project to benefit the biggest things—elders and youth. Elders leaving their homes and youth not reaching their potential and there not being enough leaders.”

- What is the significance of the profound, fundamental connection to place that exists for the people of this region?
- Will it be possible for this group to create or accelerate positive change in the region?
- Will it be possible to transform the social and cultural diversity that exists in the region from a complication to an asset?

“This piece of coal represents fire and passion in the belly that already exists in people in this region. Can we find that passion, that fire in the belly and reaffirm the shared values that we don’t talk about? Can Meadowlark create a vision of where we are so everyone feels included in a way that affirms that their place and home is here and their passion and longing are here?”

“The project seems to be headed in the

- What is the meaning and significance of “differing world views” to the future of this region?

direction of taking on an economic focus. Should there be one?”

Both in early interviews and in the opening plenary session, many Team Members expressed interest in exploring these questions. Divergent perspectives in the group regarding these questions did not appear to change over the course of the workshop, although many Team Members articulated eagerness and determination to address the challenges these questions raise.

“My concern is that [we] are really motivated to deal with issues in crisis and we don’t have enough urgency to make the difficult changes necessary for the future.”

The Foundation Workshop concluded with a round of reflections from those present on the things they learned or experienced in the workshop that were unexpected. These comments give an indication of the areas immediately open for further exploration by the Meadowlark Lab, and they raise again the question of how much alignment of priorities and understanding is needed for successful scenario development. One Team Member spoke for many when he said he hoped that the efforts of the Team would be both focused enough to be practical and broad enough for maximum impact.

Team Members’ Closing Comments:

“I was pleasantly surprised to connect, at least on a basic level, with so many thoughtful and committed leaders in the region. This was truly an impressive group of individuals.”

In the closing remarks, many Team Members also expressed renewed commitment to three process principles intended to deepen relationships among the Lab Team in the months ahead:

“It’s important that people outside this group support the Meadowlark process. I work with people who are results-oriented. What we tell people must be the opposite of flaky. We need a clear, concise, and well thought-out statement of what we’re doing if we hope to garner support outside this group.”

- To remind one another what is important about the different aspects of the central vision of the project: to transform the northern Great Plains into “a place of opportunity for all people”
- To initiate dialogues in the region about social equity
- To sustain strong relationships with one another

“The identification of the issues was most valuable for me. It was interesting to see what people’s agendas were.”

Team Members Post-Workshop Evaluation Comments:

Following the workshop, Members of the Lab Team were invited to evaluate their experience. There were many positive comments about the process, the intellectual challenges, the depth of sharing, and the importance of the issues identified as significant for the future of the region. The responses also reflect many of the tensions previously identified, such as the

“This Lab needs to address diversity and cultural competency. From bias in facilitators to staff make-up to group make-up, this seemed very much a white-driven process and design.”

importance of addressing issues of racism and cultural competency within the Lab Team and concerns about the relative value of pursuing strategies that were economic in nature versus those that focused on developing leadership qualities.

Several Team Members raised new questions about the lack of diversity in the staffing team, and cultural biases inherent in the project design. In addition, one Team Member indicated discomfort with a perception of a liberal political bias in the make-up of the Lab Team.

The ultimate success of the project will depend upon the degree to which the Meadowlark Lab Team and staff are able to use these challenges to enrich and broaden the development of the scenarios, the pilot projects, and the ongoing relationships within the Lab Team itself.

“The racism discussion took too much time away from other equally important issues.”

“The project needed to have a more balanced team, as far as political beliefs. ...you cannot find an acceptable solution without a majority of the viewpoints. It was clearly an overly-liberal group.”

“I think that deep friendships have been established in the past three days.”

“I have never been so intellectually fatigued.”

“Will there be strength internally to overcome difficulties?”

“If we can’t make it work here, we can’t make it work.”

“I have felt a lingering presence of my fellow Lab Members and often reflected upon the dialogue we engaged in, our struggles to understand each other’s perspectives, and our unfolding future together.”

Appendix A

Lab Team Members for the Foundation Workshop

Ryan Aasheim, CEO Praxis, Fargo, ND

Terri Aldrich, Minot Council of the Arts, Minot, ND

Amalia Anderson, Main Street Project, Minneapolis, MN

***Ken Barker**, Barker Reynolds Law Firm, Belle Fourche, SD

***Joe Bartmann**, The Rural Learning Center, Howard, SD

Paul Batcheller, PrairieGold Venture Partners, Sioux Falls, SD

Stacie Blue, Belcourt, ND

Jason Crain, Sioux Valley Health, Sioux Falls, SD

***Beth Davis**, South Dakota Rural Enterprise, Sioux Falls, SD

Reggie Edwards, Region Nine Development Center, Mankato, MN

Rachel Emmons, Greystone Group, Washington, D.C.

Raul Fernandez, Northern Great Plains Inc., Fargo, ND

Katie Fernholz, Dovetail Partners, Minneapolis, MN

Rand Fisher, Iowa Area Development Group, West Des Moines, IA

Jane Halliburton, Story County Board of Supervisors, Nevada, IA

Christine Hamilton, Christiansen Land & Cattle, Ltd, Kimball, SD

***Mark Hamilton**, Times Citizen Communications, Iowa Falls, IA

Lisa Heinert, HomeTown Competitiveness, Lincoln, NE

Chas Jewett, Sierra Club, Rapid City, SD

Marsha Laux, Iowa State Univ.—Value Added Agriculture, Fairfield, IA

Tony Looking Elk, Northwest Area Foundation, St. Paul, MN

Lynda Bourque Moss, Foundation for Community Vitality, Billings, MT

***Arlette Preston**, Home Instead Senior Care, Fargo, ND

Matt Schanandore, Fort Abraham Lincoln Foundation, Mandan, ND

Jose J. Soto, Southeast Community College, Lincoln, NE

Russell Swagger, United Tribes Technical College, Bismarck, ND

***Roberto Tapiz**, West Central Initiative, Fergus Falls, MN

***Ted Tietjen**, Grant, NE

Diana Vander Woude, Center for Learning & Innovation, Sioux Valley Health System, Sioux Falls, SD

Michael Wohlfeil, Concordia College, Moorhead, MN

* Not in attendance at the Foundation Workshop

Lab Secretariat

Jerry Nagel, Northern Great Plains, Inc.
Melissa Sobolik, Northern Great Plains, Inc.
Nancy Gabriel, Sustainability Institute
Hal Hamilton, Sustainability Institute
Don Seville, Sustainability Institute
Susan Sweitzer, Sustainability Institute
Adam Kahane, Generon Consulting
Susan Stickley, Scenario Planning, Stratus, Inc.
Eliot Glassheim, Northern Great Plains, Inc.
Brenda Menier, Northern Great Plains, Inc.

Appendix B

Map of the Current System

The most important issues or problems that need to be addressed in order to make progress in the region toward becoming a place of opportunity for all:

- **Economic Vitality**
 - We need an economic engine to create opportunities. This isn't a social program; there needs to be a self-sustaining economic payoff.
 - Education, services, entrepreneurs with access to capital.
 - Education: lack of funding for arts education and technology, especially in rural areas; school consolidation is a big issue for rural families.
 - Sustainable economy; prison-based and immigrant detention centers; corporate influence on the economy and how prison-based economy is linked to the larger economy. Building prisons in communities where incarcerated folks are living. Perverse incentive.

- **Mindset and Culture**
 - Loss of meaning of our traditions; loss of form, but the meaning stays; reconnect to those with meaning.
 - Attitudes that relate to environment, lifestyles, age, sex, independent spirit, racism.
 - Image of the Great Plains to outsiders.
 - Use resources (crops, land and water) from a value perspective, rather than a need or want point of view; ensure these resources are spread throughout region.
 - Stop being lazy: take action, work together, participate.
 - Tolerance of diversity, including racism, sexism, ageism, correlate with innovation, potential, and economic development.
 - Entrepreneurism. The region is risk-averse; we need to encourage more risk taking.
 - Methamphetamine and drug use and the after-effects in all the different systems, which are absorbing the social costs. Attitudes and Methamphetamine: mindset, vision, hope, fears, and internal attitudes.
 - How we manage change.

- **Access**
 - Access to capital.
 - Healthcare: affordable, accessible, with services.
 - Education: equal, accessible, quality.
 - Access to services: technology, art services, quality of life issues; equal access to everything out there.

- **Distribution of Wealth**
 - Land ownership barriers, access, who owns what.
 - Class disparity: distance between the have's and have-not's is increasing.

- Transfer of wealth: land, home ownership, money, transfer of cultural knowledge. It is happening rapidly and often transfers out of the region. If land is taken for granted there's no connection to land once it's gone. A problem and an opportunity.
- Changing Social Capital
 - Youth out-migration, demographics.
 - Changing demographics. Out migration from rural areas and in migration issues in urban areas, aging (how many will be here to support infrastructure); lack of opportunities for youth; the changing face of the region.
 - Social capital: communities, how we interact, what type of capacity we have.
 - Loss of kinship and neighboring in the region; social capital.
- Attraction
 - Fun, rodeo, pheasant hunting, enjoying life.
 - Equal education that is comprehensive, affordable, and funded (don't want corporate funding).
 - Lack of high-paying jobs for youth to cover student loans.
- Politics
 - Competing, inconsistent goals and strategies within the region.
 - Polarization of politics and ideas and conversations. Iowa elects a liberal senator as well as conservatives by big majorities. Swap out some accomplished politicians and we are red and blue; some move back and forth and are ripe to get ripped.
 - Strategic thinking about the region's future place in the world and how it is sustainable.
- Physical Resources
 - Water/resources basic needs.
 - Existing infrastructure: education, transportation, and technology systems.
 - Natural resources should be protected. High land values mean access is limited and there are barriers to entry. Make sure we use our natural resources well. Promote the bio-economy as a part of who we are.
 - How we use or view our natural resources, ownership, use rights, water and land.
- People
 - Need for rural and urban to be more collaborative, connected and trusting (polarization link).

Additional Subjects which may influence the future and need further research:

- Faith and spirituality
- Family
- The changing role of agriculture

- Globalization
- Socially responsible capitalism
- Transportation (cost, distances and diminished services as a barrier to economic development)
- The arts
- Research and development in economic vitality
- Access to affordable housing
- Learning from the history of people and weather in the region for the past 500 years
- Learning from other cultures (present and past)

APPENDIX C

Trends

What are the major trends in the region that are important?

1. Mindsets: greater or less tolerance, openness, diversity
2. Government accountability (corporate ethics declining, but possible increase in compliance standards)
3. Privatization
4. Intergenerational wealth being transferred out of the region
5. Pluralism vs. individualism (individualism seems to be increasing)
6. Loss of cultural identity in indigenous communities, rural communities, and new immigrant communities
7. Foreign student enrollments: declining or increasing in the region?
8. Methamphetamine and drug use: declining or increasing in the region?
9. Movement toward women getting education and becoming more dominant players in economic arenas
10. Poverty: increasing or decreasing? (Including a “poverty” state of mind: becoming successful but not fitting with the rest of the people; those who like being poor; those whose potential is undermined)
11. Demographic changes, including migration in a global context and more people dying than being born, except in Native American and immigrant communities
12. Consolidation of land ownership and absentee ownership
13. Polarization and loss of connection to the political process
14. Federal deficit and decreasing access to federal funds for infrastructure; competition for federal funds
15. Financial literacy about personal income and increased personal debt levels
16. Philanthropy: increasing or decreasing?
17. Increasing or decreasing political power of rural areas in the northern Great Plains?
18. Corporate power and special interest groups
19. Urbanization globally (look for changes, indicators of trends)

Appendix D

Mini-Learning Journey Reports from Individual Teams

Learning Journey: Little Earth 07/25/06

Little Earth Representatives:

Bill Ziegler, Executive Director
Mary LaGarde, Assistant Executive Director
Lori Ellis, Little Earth Resident

Background/Visit:

Lab Team Member Marsha Laux served as the person introducing Meadowlark to the hosts for our Learning Journey to Little Earth. Little Earth had experienced five homicides in as many months and it seemed like it was a hopeless situation – gangs, drugs, violence. Interestingly, 90% of the crimes currently committed at Little Earth are by Native Americans, but the perpetrators are not residents of Little Earth. Additionally, the children seemed to have no sense of where they came from.

We visited with Bill Ziegler and Mary LaGarde regarding the current challenges facing Little Earth and the transformation that has been underway during the past eighteen months. During that time, Little Earth has been working on partnerships, creating relationships, and networking within the community. He also indicated that members of the community are making the changes that have resulted in a remarkable turnaround – reduction in gang presence, children playing in the park, decrease in crime. Bill stated, “If you want a better tomorrow you need to make a better today.” He also indicated that he was trying to build a “small town” mentality in the middle of the city and hoped that the community would band together.

Bill Ziegler shared with us his dreams for Little Earth, including building their own school; building a community center to function as a gathering point for the community (planning for this is already underway), building a food cooperative, and adding a home-ownership component for residents (currently all units are Section 8 rentals). He also shared with us that although they have come a long way they need to keep moving forward – that it would be very easy to slip back. He commented, “There are peaks and valleys in life; it’s your responsibility to learn from them.”

The makeup of Little Earth was interesting: 850 “official” residents (according to the rental records), but with an actual total that is probably closer to 1500 to 1700, including 500 children under the age of 18 attending 26 different schools. Many of the residents are second or third generation – some have been in the community for over 30 years. Twenty-five percent of the households report income, but many of them are unable to take advantage of employment opportunities due to issues related to benefits and childcare. Eighty-five percent of the households are headed by single females. Thirty-eight different tribal nations are represented in the community. Bill Ziegler commented to us that it wasn’t necessary for everyone at Little Earth to “go out and get Native spirituality – just the values.” Along these lines he shared with us that they have started a Little Earth drum group and they are working on establishing

responsibility to community, perhaps as a way to fill a void. Bill also commented that this “community is a baby when it comes to culture.”

During our discussion with Bill, Team Member Diana Vander Woude asked him about his own story and how he came to be at Little Earth. His response was quite interesting – he indicated that he was “tired of the fight on the reservation,” a reference to tribal politics, and he noted that he was the third generation in his family to be on the tribal council.

We also had the opportunity to speak with Lori Ellis, a long-time resident of Little Earth. Lori felt that it is the “people who think that it’s just a place to live that cause the instability [at Little Earth] and that they need to realize it is a community.” Lori also described the role that politics has played in the evolution of Little Earth. From our conversations, as well as a detailed timeline on display, we were able to hear and see the history of Little Earth from its completion in 1973 through restructuring due to management issues in the 1990s. (Little Earth struggled to survive through the 1980s and by the 1990s its fate was in the hands of the courts. With help from HUD in 1994, the community reorganized itself.)

Meadowlark Lab Team Debrief:

Things that stood out:

- The people were nice
- Leadership
- Community involvement
- Incredible to think about the leadership – the outcomes they’ve achieved in 18 months
- The history
- The paradox of being so affected by state and national politics while at the same time becoming more aware of their own growing political clout
 - Not necessarily a problem that needs to be fixed, it “just is”
- Confusion – on the part of our Lab Team Members on the various connections between the different entities we visited
- Partnerships
- Some sections of the development were rundown
- Some of the residents looked unhealthy
- The lack of entrepreneurial spirit
- The fact that 85.0% of the households (according to records) were headed by single women
- The paradox that exists between restriction/freedom
- Wonder about the children
- Longer-term residents vs. more transient residents
- Felt less safe on the west side (of the development) than the east side
- Indian-based social services
 - Hopeful that they will be able to turn the system around
- “Something new has to be creative”
- System for the subsidies
 - These are global issues – not culturally specific

- How much difference changes to the environment can make
- “*Tiospaye*” – word that Bill Ziegler used frequently (hope)
- Politics dating back hundreds of years
- Not owed/no entitlement (something that Bill Ziegler emphasized)

Things that were different than what we thought:

- “Thought it was going to be worse”
- “Tried to disconnect the ‘Native American’ component from the success”
 - It is the leadership that is making a difference
- They are working together and taking ownership
- They looked at the values of the culture and extrapolated from that
 - Being deliberately discerning about their history
- Being very intentional
 - Resourceful in finding ways to meet their needs
- Moved from a sense of hopelessness to hope

Things to consider for future Learning Journeys:

- More background and information before the journey
- Size of group
 - Perhaps smaller
- Make a point to introduce everyone in the group
- Visit with more people (in this case, perhaps more residents)
- Think about partnerships
 - Possibility that the Learning Journeys are potential partnership opportunities
- Collective learning – just be aware that this is a big part of the Learning Journeys

Information collected/compiled by Rachel A. Emmons

Learning Journey: Somali Mall (1)

Minneapolis, MN 07/25/06

Notes from the visit:

Tour with Bodhari Abdi, a student and volunteer with the African Development Center of Minnesota. Visit to Suuqa Karmel (Karmel Market or Somali Mall).

Somali support and welcoming

- When a Somali person arrives here the first Somali person who meets him/her will try to help and try to locate his/her kin. They will ask: Who are you looking for? Who do you know?

Why Minnesota and how do Somalis find Minneapolis?

- Somalis know there is a community here that will help, and they spread that information through networks and word of mouth.

Information about the Mall

- Suuqa Karmel was the first Somali Mall and is about 10 years old. It recently expanded to a second block of stores.
- It is the first place for Somalis to come to and make connections
- The City of Minneapolis provided some help for the project (also some help from Hennepin County)
- The buildings are privately owned (Sabri Properties, Basim Sabri – Arabian man who has been in jail for about a year)

Values and Beliefs

- Somalis “start a business wherever they go”
- Entrepreneurial
- “Somali mothers are very strong”
- Grandmothers have authority over mothers
- Female authority makes up for loss of government structure at home
- Don’t refuse an offer (guest doesn’t pay for anything)
- Basic, common immigrant opportunities in terms of jobs and education

Interview with storeowner

- She had a small store, now has a bigger store
- Travels monthly and extensively to find merchandise
- Gets merchandise from Singapore, Turkey, Chicago, L.A., China, Malaysia
- If you have children, you need to take care of them first – then take jobs – one, two, whatever it takes
- 4 or 5 people will work together to get money to get merchandise from (American) wholesalers
- Use credit for first shipment – “blank check” system of credit – then put money into account that check is made out from
- She made a visit to Kansas City and now supplies a store there - entrepreneurial spirit of starting stores
- Now business is tough as the dollar is weaker (bad exchange with Euro)
- Good business understanding – such as understanding how the dollar fluctuates – even without other more basic knowledge of the American financial system
- Has difficulty in accessing capital – need to be the original lease holder to get a loan
- Cultural issues: Muslims can’t take/pay interest. Instead, they make arrangements to share part of the profits (no use of savings or other interest-bearing accounts)
- Storeowner had been a banker in Somalia
- She works part of the day; another lady works the other hours
- Mostly women in the stores
- Men have jobs in trucking, manufacturing, as taxi drivers, etc. and are generally less entrepreneurial
- With the war in Somalia, there is an economic dependence on women – they are doing the work while the men are fighting

- Her background: the storeowner is alone. She has 50 other family members scattered throughout the U.S., with 17 in Minnesota. She came in 1995 and worked 3 years at the post office. She has a physics and math education and worked at a commercial bank in Somalia. Worked with an international immigration organization and did their accounting (1989, 4 years). In 1990 the war started and she came to Kenya. Father at U.N in Somalia – was Italian soldier – died in '79 and family moved out of Somalia then; brother was Ambassador living in New York (died in 2005) and sponsored her move to America in 1996. She went to college and has a B.S. and was a teacher in math/physics ('81-'85) in Somalia. However, education and documentation don't transfer to America. She enrolled in 2-year accounting program at St. Thomas, but quit after 1.5 years to help mother and couldn't finish the program.
- Working only since 1997, so just starting to make some money
- "I want education back"
- Wants to learn to drive but is scared; now taking lessons
- Has a well-to-do family back home (Somalia) and is now helping many people (by sending money home)
- Travels every month and takes vacations all around the country
- Has been a U.S. citizen for 5 years
- Made a visit back to Kenya in 2001
- Plans to buy her own house
- Likes the cold; is used to Minnesota weather
- "Too hot to go back home"
- Likes the freedom in America; welcoming and helpful people
- She is working now – just needed help in the beginning – now making some money
- \$3,000 in costs each month (money going out)
- \$1,200/month to rent store

Experiences and Comments:

- Conflict over asking permission to take pictures in the mall
- There is tension between young blacks and Africans (starts in high schools with students picking on each other and creating conflict). It was bad three years ago – much better since adults intervened
- Have better relationships with police – more services from City (e.g., translators)
- "People can't do anything to you – you choose your future." The biggest threat to Somali community is happening with the youth – drugs, gangs, etc. It used to be that any adult could/would step in to discipline a child who was misbehaving, but that doesn't happen now. People ignore behaviors and actions and focus on their own lives.
- Mall is a place to see "Somali celebrities" – e.g., basketball player
- 40% of Somalis would likely stay in Minnesota even if the conflict ended in Somalia
- "We hope someday things will be normal"
- Generational differences (older – more attached to Somalia; younger – more at home in Minnesota)
- Felt like a "closed community" – sensed the Somali people may need to be more inviting to improve their business situation and opportunities

- Lack of diversity in products offered for sale in stores – may be a limiting factor in business success – perhaps an opportunity for cooperation which seemed to be lacking
- Dominated by competition and nomadic heritage
- Sensed a lack of curiosity (inward focus on own culture and needs)
- Would have liked to talk with more individuals to get additional perspectives
- Would like to have a better understanding of Islam

Learning Journey: The Somali Mall (2)

07/25/06

Our guide was a Young Somali woman about 21 years old who was attending college. She had a few relatives that ran stores within the mall. She goes by the name “Nemo.” She received this name because someone had mispronounced her given name and that is what it sounded like.

Cultural Issues

Part of the teaching of Islam is that followers cannot receive or charge interest. Because of this, many stores don't last long or grow very rapidly because they cannot build credit. In 1992, the Somali community started immigrating to the United States. The last large immigration of Somali people was between 2003- 2004. Many people from Somalia that still live in Africa are nomads. They usually stay together with their family or clan. There is often a “clanship migration,” where many people will move to a single location because they have a family member that lives within that location.

The community structure was very different for the Somali people in Africa. They had a strong community system that created security and social activity. The older Somali people that come to the United States have difficulty adjusting to the social system that exists in the United States. The high-rise apartment buildings and fenced-in neighborhoods make it difficult for the people to maintain a social life, which affects their overall assimilation into the North American culture. The young Somali people adjust more quickly and assimilate much more quickly than the older generation. The young Somali population gets mixed up between accepting the pop culture, African-American culture, and maintaining their individual cultural identity. There are cultural clashes between the existing African-American culture in the United States and the Somali African-American culture. The Somali cultural family structure has also been affected in the United States. First off, since the young are the fastest to assimilate and learn English they often have to translate for their parents. This makes the family structure dependent upon the child and causes frustration for the adults. The second aspect of the family structure that has been affected is that the women within the Somali culture in Africa were dependent on the success of the men in their family for social and economic status. In the United States, the young Somali women are achieving higher education in greater numbers than Somali men.

Throughout the process of coming from Africa to the United States there are many stops. It can take years for someone to reach the United States. The clan lifestyle that the Somali community maintains keeps records of their heritage for many generations. Our guide mentioned that she

receives phone calls from people who still live in Africa that she has never met or heard of but because they are still part of her clan they request money from her to help them.

It is culturally and religiously incorrect for a women to come in contact with a man that is not her brother or her father because it “contaminates” her and she is considered unclean (she must be clean when she prays). Many traditional women will not shake a man’s hand or will place a cloth between their hand and the man’s to prevent contact.

Economic Issues

Competition is high within the mall and there is high turnover. Many shops are leased on a month-by-month basis. The Mall that we visited was privately owned, which caused many problems of its own. Because there is no input on the workings of the mall by the current store owners, they have no control over who their neighbor retailers are. So if you sell dresses and the person next to you wants to sell dresses, you have no way of preventing them or any recourse if they put you out of business. We were told that other Somali malls are a mixed private/public partnership, where the store owners and renters are included in mall decisions to insure that there aren’t too many stores selling the same things and that there is enough profit gained by all the retailers.

There is very little cultural sensitivity towards the Somali community from American financial institutions, and the Somali community has very little financial education. Banks in general don’t like to give loans to small business. The Somali community has found their own ways to save money and acquire capital. This often happens within families and clans. For example, a group of family members will get together and every month one of the family members will put a predetermined amount of money into a pool until there is enough money for one of the members to make an investment into what they need/want. After that person takes the funds, family members continue to accumulate money in the pool until it is the next family member’s turn to pull the funds out of the pot.

The shopkeepers acquire inventory by making a deal with their distributors. The distributors give the shopkeepers products to sell and the distributors receive a portion of the profits. This places the distributors more in the position of investors or business partners and ties them more closely with the retailer. This saves the retailer from having to pay interest, which is against their faith.

How have the incidents on September 11, 2001 affected the Somali community? There have been some changes in the perception of the community because much of the Somali community is Muslim. There have been some people that have been beaten because of their faith and some people killed.

Debriefing

- While walking through the mall, the women in our group became self-conscious that they themselves were not wearing something on their heads like all of the other women in the mall.

- While walking through the mall, a person suggested to us that we should buy a book that translates English into Arabic and then study the Koran.
- The women seemed very much the leaders in the community. It was also noted that while there were many women who ran their own stores, there were many men who sat in restaurants and benches. When we asked our guide about this, she said, “Men sit in restaurants,” as if to say that it is culturally acceptable for the women to run the store while the men socialized.
- The loss of community parenting (not just one or two parents but the whole community taking care of the young) has affected their family structure.
- We were told that there is a Somali TV station and that the Somali community stays aware of international and local news very religiously.
- When asked if the guide thought that this was a difficult thing to do (to take the risk of opening their own store), she replied, “You have to do this for life.” In other words, they don’t have a choice and need to do this to survive.
- There is a place for people to pray upstairs in the mall.
- Someone noticed that there was a strong affectionate bond between men at the mall. We noticed men holding hands and walking, hugging each other, and other signs of affection.
- Even though the current banking system does not work for them, they have created other ways to get what they need.

Learning Journey: Hmong Cultural Center

St. Paul, MN 07/25/06

Initial Reactions:

- Interesting—seemed like there was a blending/adapting of culture while still hanging onto their political structure/identity
- You could sense the struggle for survival
- The services they provided were amazing
- The strength of the culture lies in their adaptability
- What an amazing journey from the jungles to the Minnesota winter
- In Hmong community, family is a priority and a strength

Questions We Have:

- To what extent would I be able to “make it” in a similar situation? Would I have the strength to persevere and maintain my identity? I’d like to think so, but I’m not so sure.
- Hearing President Bush refer to the U.S. as an “empire” reminds me of all the bad karma the U.S. has built up over the last 200 years.
- They were very respectful of one of the Meadowlark Participant’s service in the Military. Not sure why. This was surprising.
- What is it that compels us to finally realize that “something needs to be done?”

- They referred to the U.S. soldiers as “our soldiers.” This was surprising given the history we learned about Vietnam.
- This visit mostly raised other questions—I feel like I have lived a really sheltered life. I’m naïve about diversity. There may be diversity in town, but not in my personal circle.
- How can we really make Meadowlark a project “for all people?” Can we ever really learn about everyone?

Other Observations:

- Diversity is also about similarities—like the role that faith plays in someone’s life, the connection to the land, the dreams we have for our children—even though our backgrounds are different.
- We usually look for differences before seeing similarities—why is that?
- I was impressed to find gentleness and human inspiration among people who were treated so badly.
- Gentle, beautiful traditions... why do Americans feel like we don’t have any?
- Watching the kids play traditional instruments was nice.
- I realized that I would have been more bitter if this had happened to “me” and “my people”
- People just want opportunities... not hand outs.
- It seemed like Minnesota was a very welcoming state to the Hmong people.
- Realization that what we are seeing today seems amazing, but it really comes after 18 years of hard work—we can’t forget that.
- Life is complex—there are no easy answers, and it gets more complex the more we add in issues like race, class, gender, ethnicity, language.

Final Thoughts:

- Still thinking about the kids... that is the future.
- What anchors people, what keeps them together?
- Wondering about what makes for cohesiveness in culture.
- His explanation for what helped kids stay out of trouble was either Christian or traditional Hmong religion... what about the rest?
- Is this about race? Is it a generational difference? Is what the Hmong youth going through so different than other youth? My first reaction is that it is the same across cultures.

Learning Journey: Latino Markets

Both of these Learning Journey Reports will be included in the next edition of this history.

APPENDIX E

Learning Agenda

- Understanding our states: culture, history and education
 - Data on youth migration within and out of the region
 - Types of history and cultural trends in the northern Great Plains:
 - weather patterns, demographic shifts, cultural influences, and historical data
 - demographics; statistics on culture and religion
 - Data on distribution infrastructure/assets:
 - Visual and narrative data on roads, universities, hospitals, water, and sewer
 - Similarities and differences between the northern Great Plains states in education, transportation, and healthcare
 - State and regional abstracts
 - Power structure of each state
 - Trends in substance abuse
 - How do states determine basic educational elements across the northern Great Plains?
 - What are the graduation rates in the region?
 - What is the readiness to learn pre-K through 12?
 - Role of community and technical colleges in growth
 - Impact of consolidation on rural areas
 - Identify organizations, individuals, and businesses acting regionally
 - Report on experiential field trips to reservations, ethanol plant, viable rural communities, communities transitioning to new cultures, and family farms
 - Visit individuals in the northern Great Plains to experience their realities
 - Collect information about each state's concerns through a survey tool (interview template with three key questions)
 - Convene broad public/private partners through video conferencing
- Current Social Issues
 - What motivates different generations?
 - Explore political and cultural differences within the Lab Team
 - Explore the role of religions in the region
 - Research a process for discussing social issues in Lab Team—what to share and how to share it
 - Explore beliefs
 - Develop a common understanding of terminology
 - What is our process for settling differences?
 - Racism: need more information; create a safe place for discussion
 - Clarify values, visions, resources, expectations (personal and team) within the Lab Team
 - Does the region have a shared vision of social justice, and what are the indicators?

- Social Change Efforts
 - Lessons learned by others' efforts in communities and regions
 - Case studies of thriving rural communities
 - How can communities develop realistic expectations?
 - Case studies of urban areas/neighborhoods, thriving communities (including cultural diversity)
 - Who are the risk-taking leaders with credibility and why do they have credibility?
 - Have other regions done anything like this?

- Economy and Access to Capital
 - Trends for the economy
 - What are the trends in socially responsible capitalism?
 - Identify needs in the global national market: look for competitive advantages to filling those needs
 - Trends in the tourism industry and how arts impact tourism
 - Urbanization trends and types of development, including corporate movement to the northern Great Plains
 - Current conditions and trends in agriculture and the environment
 - Transfer of wealth (where it is, where it is going, when it is transferring, what is transferring)
 - Trends in agriculture (number of new farms, number of family farms, role/impact on economy, drought)
 - What are the gaps in financing economic activities in rural areas?
 - How to identify capital resources (coordinate, access, identify information, products and needs)

- Natural Resources
 - Learn about pros and cons of renewable energy
 - Learn about natural resource inventory/reserves, uses
 - What can region do to capitalize on renewable energy?
 - Identify the resources of the region
 - Is there alignment between current natural resources and projections?
 - Need to question the effect on the region in terms of natural resources (commerce, recreation, preservation)
 - Trends in civic engagement (service clubs, volunteerism)

- Poverty
 - Poverty issues in housing, the economy, rural communities, and how they will be sustained in severe droughts
 - What are the needs that must be met to maintain a livelihood in the region?
 - Description of distribution of wealth in the northern Great Plains
 - How it is related to history, education and access to capital?

Appendix F

Meadowlark Leadership Lab Events

- **Foundation Workshop:** July 2006. The Team begins to construct a shared map of the current reality of the system based on varied perspectives and experiences and identifies areas for further research and learning. Location: Monticello, MN.
- **Learning Journeys.** Trips organized around the Learning Agenda developed in the first workshop, designed to help the participants learn about the system through first-hand observations. Locations: Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota.
- **Scenario Workshop:** January 8-11, 2007. The Team will synthesize observations from the learning journeys and construct a set of three to four scenarios representing visions of the future for the northern Great Plains. Location: The Lied Center, Nebraska City, Nebraska (800) 546-5433 www.liedlodge.org
- **Public Engagements:** January through June 2007, specific dates and locations to be determined. Members of the Lab will lead public dialogues focused on the scenarios in locations throughout the region. Feedback and ideas for pilot projects will be collected from these public meetings and inform the further work of the Lab.
- **Innovation Retreat:** June 2-8, 2007. The Team will synthesize feedback from the public engagements, crystallize visions of the future that they want and believe need to come forth for the region, and identify strategic leverage points for shifting the region towards these visions. Location: Sylvan Lake Lodge, Custer State Park,, South Dakota.
- **Design Studio:** October 2007. The kick-off for the prototype initiatives. Each of these initiatives will be aimed at demonstrating futures for the region that demonstrate how it can be a place of opportunity for all people. Location: to be determined.