How Public Sector Jobs Can Foster Community Economies

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Abstract:

Evidence shows that places where the public sector is well-supported see improvements in their economies, even during recessions. They also see an increase in standard of living for those who are otherwise most marginalized, reducing the gap between rich and poor. As part of a broader vision of a people-first community economy, a commitment to public sector jobs that support wellbeing (such as those in healthcare, education, and other social services) is an important step towards health, equity, and economic sustainability in BC. This paper offers a brief overview of our current predicament, presents an alternative framing of economic development, and then considers potential policy outcomes that follow. Specifically, it addresses the role public sector jobs can play in both social and economic development over the long term and what might enable us to better support the public sector.

Key words: British Columbia; community economies; jobs plan; public sector; tax reform.

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> The Clark government has been unwaveringly cautious about giving up a nickel of tax revenue or spending a dime on additional public services because of the lacklustre growth the province has experienced in recent years. And, of course, because the Liberals are loathe to boost taxation — something that would make BC even less competitive. (Yaffe, 2014)

That was an excerpt from a Summer 2014 *Vancouver Sun* article – its content and the sentiments it represents will likely be familiar to BC residents. The following paragraph is by economic scholars, Bjornholt (from Norway) and McKay (from Scotland). Although based on research findings from around the globe, their observation rarely gets front page news or mention in provincial discussions around jobs, economic development, and public policy:

> Spending cuts to public health care, education, and other public services are … shown to have a strong negative effect on overall economic performance. Therefore, as opposed to providing a justification for cutting public spending, the crisis in the economy may provide us with an opportunity to justify public sector investment in key areas that support the wellbeing of families and wider communities. (Bjornholt & McKay, 2013, p. 10)

So, while it is in the name of 'the economy' that the public sector continues to experience cutbacks, there is great reason to believe that for the sake of 'the economy' that is precisely where money should be spent. In fact worldwide, when faced with recessions, "governments that have *increased* public-sector spending have seen faster economic recoveries, which in turn helps them to grow out of debt" (Stuckler & Basu, 2013, p. 140-141, emphasis added).

What might happen if we took these claims seriously? How might we then approach a jobs plan for BC? What might we consider to be sound economic decisions for this province? How might our children, families and communities fare? In the pages that follow I will offer a brief overview of our current predicament, present an alternative framing of economic development, and then consider potential policy outcomes that follow. Specifically, I will address the role public sector jobs can play in both social and economic development over the long term and what might enable us to better support the public sector.

Where We Are Now

Narratives in which the public sector is framed as a liability, an economic drain, a privilege, or an excess are plentiful. We continue to be told by political figures and economists that although public services are valuable, we have to be realistic and live within our means. Inevitably, these kinds of statements prepare the ground for the cutbacks we have seen to health care, education, and other public services in British Columbia. This storyline enables us to hold onto a prized self-identity as a province in which we take care of each other and create conditions for opportunity - even while we deplete the very means by which we might realize this potential. These discussions are reiterated at a national and international level, and also around dinner tables in communities. With the story of limited resources and mandatory growth being told simultaneously by so many voices, it is no wonder alternatives – however feasible – are often drowned out by the hum (see also Newbury, 2011).

But this is not just talk. The implications of this kind of public discourse are real and far-reaching. Between the years of 1989 and 2007, child poverty in Canada increased, even while economic growth also rose (Albanese, 2010). This calls into question arguments of 'trickle down,' and suggests we need to think about economic and social development as requiring something other than growing the GDP. Evidence suggests that rather than GDP, a better measure of prosperity is the size of the gap between rich and poor (MacDonald, 2014; Winegard, 2011). Inequality is negatively correlated with physical health, mental health, and even social mobility (Winegard, 2011; see also Teghtsoonian, 2009). And while income inequality is indeed important to address, MacDonald (2014) reminds us that this alone does not necessarily capture the gap in *wealth* in this country. Wealth inequality is even more extreme, and “the gains of economic growth land disproportionally in the hands of the concentrate few at the very top of Canada’s income and wealth spectrums” (p. 8). In fact, “the wealthiest 20% hold almost 70% of all net worth …[while] the poorest are in net debt” (p. 9). This calls into question the steadfast commitment to growth by the current provincial government, articulated in the opening excerpt. On what basis does this commitment lie?

In British Columbia, both the public health and education systems have recently suffered as our government invests less in these areas. This leads to the loss not only of jobs, but of the means by which British Columbians remain healthy and connected to one another (which are important routes towards less disparity among us according to Albanese, 2010). Public policy that moves in the direction of privatization inevitably serves to benefit those who are already doing well, while those who may already be on the margins bear the burden disproportionally. Cuts to the public sector place more responsibility on women, children, Aboriginal Canadians, new immigrants, and others who rely on publically funded services for such things as child care, elder care, and other important services (Ivanova & Klein, 2013). This further increases inequities that already exist in our province, widening the gap between rich and poor.

A jobs plan for British Columbia must work to shrink this gap, and there are a number of reasons the public sector is an important part of such a strategy.

Community Economies

Before exploring possibilities, it is useful to first consider what we mean when we say ‘economy.’ The term *community economy* is used to make visible the interconnectedness of social and economic wellbeing. "[A]ll economic activity depends on a web of social, cultural and environmental functions that sustain it in the long term" (O'Hara, 2013, p. 39). When we start building economies without taking this into consideration, we build a house of cards.

When citizens are isolated, they are less engaged and can contribute less – economically and otherwise – and in fact require more of our already over-burdened systems of support. When communities are healthy, however, citizens are more engaged and economies also thrive. A community economy approach makes explicit the fact that capitalist market activity is one part of economic life, but does not encompass its entirety. Other means of production and distribution of goods and services (such as volunteer efforts, producing food, caring for children and the elderly, bartering, and more) are not only important to include in our understanding of what comprises the economy, but also crucial in that without these activities the formal market economy would collapse (see Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healy, 2013).

From this perspective, economy is more a verb than a noun – what it looks like has everything to do with the activities we participate in as citizens (which of course are either facilitated or restricted by policy). Ideally, the economy is not a fixed reality to which we must comply; it is a process in which we are engaged, and which we in fact create through our engagement. Throughout history and around the world, it is clear that economies take many shapes, depending on the dynamics at play in a particular time and place. Thus, how we conceive of and participate in the economy very concretely informs what it looks like. As Gibson-Graham (2006) point out so well, "[a] community economy is an ethical and political space of decision, not a geographic or social commonality, and *community is its outcome* rather than a ground" (p. xv, emphasis added).

Overlooking the economic significance of activities that lie outside of market-based capitalist pursuits, we mistakenly continue seeking high-return investments without first supporting the people and places that make these activities possible. Cutbacks in the public sector have meant much of this work is downloaded onto women and families (Peters et al, 2013), meaning they can participate less in the formal economy, in turn leading them to require more of a now diminished social safety net. The cycle this creates is deleterious, and the long-term implications of such a system quickly become apparent. This is why it is crucial to understand investments in the public sector as not only significant social investments, but economic investments as well, as “austerity has the opposite of its intended effect” (Stuckler & Basu, 2013, p. xii); it is more likely to deepen recessions than spring us out of them. So even though the evidence suggests increased social investments can help economies of out recessions, our government is still steadfastly committed to reduced spending, as the opening excerpt illustrates. Austerity can thus perhaps be more accurately described as an economic ideology, rather than a sound policy.

With this in mind, it becomes clear that the best bet for BC moving forward is not to slash public sector services and jobs, but to bolster them. Below, we will get a better sense of what this means for British Columbians.

The Role of Public Sector Jobs in Economic and Social Development

Neo-liberal ideologies and related policies have all but convinced the BC public that in order to sustain our economy we have to 1) cut back on social spending and 2) invest in revenue-generating projects – particularly resource extraction (see for example, Lee, 2014). Evidence from around the world, however, strongly indicates that this path will make our economies and communities *more* vulnerable (Bjornholt & McKay, 2013; Stuckler & Basu, 2013; Winegard, 2011). Time and time again it has been demonstrated that increasing social spending and supporting the public sector makes communities resilient to hard times and leads them to prosperity. The pattern of benefits from stimulus and harms of austerity can be seen in "nearly a century of data on recessions and the economy, from countries all over the world" (Stuckler & Basu, 2013, p. xiii). For example, contrasting Greece's response of austerity with Iceland's increased investment in social welfare programs during its recession, we see that even though Greece had a smaller recession than Iceland at first, it "worsened with austerity. The human costs have become dramatically clear: a 52% rise in HIV, a doubling in suicide, rising homocides, and a return of malaria" (p. xiv). Stuckler and Basu remind us that poor mental and physical health attend financial vulnerability. Thus austerity makes things worse by "drastically reduc[ing] demand at a time when demand is already low. People spend less; businesses suffer, ultimately leading to more job losses and creating a vicious spiral of less and less demand and more and more unemployment" (p. xii).

And in British Columbia, our government cuts taxes and chases industry dollars, while public sector jobs (such as those in the fields of health care, education, and other social services) are suffering. The implications of these policy decisions for children, families, communities, and ecosystems are widely and deeply felt and have long term effects – and the economic costs of cutting public sector jobs are greater than might first be apparent. There is a ripple effect that is far-reaching and impacts all of us, not only those who work in the public sector or rely on public services. But first, let's look at them:

The significance of the public sector for employees

Leading up to any election, major industrial project, or even one-time events like the Olympic Games, job creation is never far from the lips of political leaders. And daily business reporting often reports the number of jobs created in a given year in comparison with others. But sometimes it is worth looking beneath the numbers. In addition to whether or not jobs are created, we might also want to look at what kinds of jobs are created, as well as whether existing jobs are also being sustained and supported. After all, we wouldn't want to be cutting jobs that offer good wages, stability, benefits, and fulfillment, and creating jobs that are temporary, unstable, and poorly compensated, would we?

According to a recent study (Longhurst, 2014), we may be doing just that in BC. In the last five years, 40 per cent of new jobs created were temporary (which includes contract, seasonal, casual and agency work). And "temporary jobs are growing more quickly than permanent jobs" (p. 5), with the rate of temporary job creation between 2009 and 2014 at 21 per cent between 2009 and 2014, while the rate of permanent job creation during that time was only 4 per cent (p. 6). While on the surface, reports of job creation can at least be read as a step in the right direction, the human side of these numbers reveals a different reality for these temporary workers. According to the same study, many temporary agency workers [TAWs] experience anxiety and stress due to financial insecurity, are often forced into debt, and live in poverty. In 2004, the "total yearly median income for TAWs in Canada was $7,850 compared to $31,360 for permanent employees" (p. 6). Upward mobility is a struggle, as buy-out clauses can get in the way of permanent employment, which means rather than a foot in the door, these jobs can feel more like dead ends.

Furthermore, while the rate of permanent job creation slows, the cutbacks to *existing* jobs in the public sector (many of which are permanent) have also been taking place. BC has the smallest public sector of all the provinces – and a smaller public sector than we had even in the 1990s - in relation to population. While other provinces have been reinvesting in this area, the

2013 BC provincial budget laid out "further cuts of over 1000 full-time public service jobs in 2013/2014 alone" (Ivanova, 2013, p. 1). An additional "350 full time jobs are to be cut over … two years, reducing the size of the public service by 5% overall by 2015" (p. 2). So here we have a situation in which full-time jobs are being replaced by temporary, unstable jobs, even while the rhetoric of 'job creation' continues unabated.

Another consideration when it comes to the significance of the public sector for employees is the quality of the work. We are implicitly encouraged to set aside questions of value in favour of simply growing the economy, but Boyle and Klein (2013) advise us to think not only about whether or not there is work in BC, but about what kind of work there is. Approximately 25 per cent of public sector workers "provide health and social services to British Columbians" (Ivanova, 2013, p. 4), and another 18 per cent work for school boards (including but not limited to teachers) (p. 5). In other words, many public sector jobs are important not only for the fact that they provide full-time employment, but they also provide essential services to British Columbians. By contrast, many new jobs being created in the province exist in the realm of resource extraction, and raise significant ethical questions about what people are expected to do for the sake of a paycheque. These jobs often take people (often men) out of their communities and away from their families, which leads to stress, isolation, and burnout for them and other family members (often women) who remain at home (Peters et al, 2013).

Boyle and Klein (2013) define a moral economy as one in which "people do not feel they have to sacrifice their values, harm human dignity or compromise ecological health in order to achieve economic security." It is worth considering whether or not our current path of cutting public sector jobs (particularly those in health, education, and social services) moves us in the direction of a moral economy, especially given the fact that most of the temporary workers in

Longhurst's (2014) study describe temporary work as a "last resort" (p. 4). What might be the long-term consequences of an economy built on the backs of employees who feel their working conditions are a "trap" (p. 6)?

The significance of the public sector for service recipients

As noted above, nearly half of all public sector jobs in BC are in the fields of health care, education, and other social services (Ivanova, 2013). What does cutting these jobs in order to balance the budget actually mean for the quality of life of those who rely on these services?

Ivanova (2013) notes that

> [w]e have increasingly shifted away from paying for much-needed programs and services together, through taxes, and toward paying individually, through user fees or by purchasing education, seniors' care and other social services in the private market. This has resulted in job losses in the public sector as well as in lower quality (under-resourced and overstretched) services, reduced access to social, educational and health programs, and higher out-of-pocket costs for BC families. (p. 15)

Moreover, there are many families who simply cannot pay out of pocket for such services. Thus the cost-saving we might believe is taking place at a provincial level is in fact simply shifting of the burden from a provincial economy to household economies. This may make it less visible, but it certainly doesn't make it go away. In order to cope with these additional economic responsibilities, families do what they can: Children may not participate in sports and other extra-curricular activities (which has long term social, emotional, and health implications), parents – often women – may remove themselves from the workforce (which can also come at emotional and other costs), 'sandwich generations' may care for both their children and their aging parents (leading to increased isolation and stress). The quality of care provided by already overburdened family members who may be struggling to make ends meet cannot be assured. And as Stuckler and Basu (2013) clearly demonstrate, these stressors are predictors of even greater crisis, as they often precipitate such things as substance abuse, depression, illness, and even violence – all of which come at great social and economic costs. They urge that "we should enact evidence-based policies to protect health during hard times. Social protection saves lives. If administered correctly, these programs don't bust the budget, but … they boost economic growth and improve public health" (p. 140).

When it comes to protecting public health, there is compelling evidence that universal programs (those which offer supports to the public in general) are much more beneficial *and* economical than targeted programs (those which offer supports to individuals and families in great need). Albanese (2010) notes that social democratic regimes in the EU that spend no more than Canada actually have a better record of poverty alleviation because they

> support programs promoting the material, educational, emotional, and physical well-being of all its citizens – to prevent poverty … This is done through the implementation of generous parental or maternity leaves, paid health and family related leaves, employment supports, accessible child care programs, national housing strategies, etc. (p. 104-105)

Canada, on the other hand, (and BC in particular) seems wedded to the fiction that money can be saved by offering 'targeted' services to those in the greatest need, and trimming back the rest – thus justifying cutbacks to these essential services. This, despite the fact that universal supports are far more effective in a) preventing poverty from becoming an issue for families and b) enabling them to 'exit' impoverished situations more readily. Targeted programs often serve to trap families in situations of dependency because it is difficult for them to access (and sustain) supports unless they are destitute (see Newbury, 2011b). Targeted programs are also usually more expensive to administer and can stigmatize those receiving services.

So beyond those who experience these very direct impacts of cutbacks in the public sector, it begins to become clear that the rest of us – all of us – are also bearing the burden of these policy decisions, as we watch them actively increase the gap in wealth and wellbeing in this province.

The significance of the public sector for general social wellbeing and long-term economic planning

> Vulnerable, low-income British Columbians have been the hardest hit (including seniors and people with disabilities who rely on community health and social services), but this shift has also reduced economic security for middle class families who increasingly find themselves having to pay school arts and sports fees, higher tuition and steeper fees for seniors' care" (Ivanova, 2013, p. 15)

In addition to people who are either employed as public servants or are direct recipients of public services, the ripple effect of our shrinking public sector has implications for society as a whole. That said, the burden is not distributed evenly. It is "disproportionately carried by nature, by women, by the young, the old, the poor and those without power" (O'Hara, 2013, p. 39). So when cuts are made for the sake of economic growth, chances are they will actually increase the disparities in our society. This, as was noted earlier, is thought to be a greater measure of prosperity than economic growth, so we may well be driving ourselves into greater crisis, rather than digging ourselves out of one.

Indeed, when Stuckler and Basu (2013) took a look at different responses to economic recessions around the world, they found that places in which governments invested in the health and wellbeing of citizens actually recovered more quickly, while those that adopted austerity measures were more likely to spiral into greater economic and social crises. They calculate that "[h]ealth, education, and social protection programs have among the highest fiscal multipliers. In the case of the health sector, public investment boosts the economy by more than three dollars for every dollar spent" (p. 144). The Canadian Public Health Association (2013) actually estimates an even greater return. Their research indicates that in the US, an investment of 10 dollars per person a year spent on "proven community-based disease prevention programs" with a focus on physical activity, nutrition, and reduced tobacco use would yield a return on investment of 6.2 dollars for every dollar invested (a net savings of almost $18 billion US dollars annually). By way of contrast, Barro and de Rugy's (2013) research strongly suggests that *cuts* to the defense budget can actually have some positive economic implications.

Shifting our priorities to better support public sector jobs, we can help community economies to become healthier, more equitable, and more sustainable.

Policy Implications

Fortunately, this is not just speculation. We now have the benefit of seeing what happens when municipalities, regions, and countries commit to a people-first economy (see Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healy, 2013; Schatz, 2008; Stuckler & Basu, 2013). In Canada, many rural community economies depend heavily on resource industries, which means they are particularly vulnerable to economic shifts over which they have no control (such as industry relocations, fuel prices, and global market trends) (Martinez-Fernandez et al, 2012; Peters et al, 2013). Particularly in rural communities, then, investing in the public sector can foster resiliency, shrink the gap between rich and poor, and mobilize economies that may otherwise be struggling.

It is important to explicitly state that we have not simply ended up in a situation in which resources for public services are tight; this is a direct result of existing public policies. In particular, the shifts in tax structures in BC have meant far less tax revenue than even ten years ago. Corporate taxes and income tax for higher tax brackets have decreased, while the tax burden has been significantly reallocated to individuals and families (Ivanova & Klein, 2013). This of course means less money coming to the province, leading to public service cuts, which in turns means families also now have to pay out of pocket for more as a result or do without – the hit is thus doubly felt. Put concretely,

> If BC collected today the same amount in tax revenues as a share of the economy (GDP) as we did in 2000, we would have $3.5 billion more in public funds this year alone. Meaning, no deficit, and the ability to invest in enhanced or even new public services. (p. 6)

Recognizing that we have actively put ourselves in this position heightens our responsibility to now take action to make it otherwise. Fortunately, realistic alternatives do exist. The common refrain that we are over-spending to keep the public sector alive is simply not supported by the facts. BC spends less on the public sector than other provinces (Ivanova, 2013) and as stated above, cuts to public sector jobs end up costing all of us (economically and otherwise) in the end. The situation BC finds itself in now is not a result of spending too much in the public sector, and in fact a clear commitment to supporting the public sector can keep BC strong and resilient in these difficult times.

There are two very feasible ways we can simultaneously balance the budget *and* sustain (perhaps even enhance) our public sector jobs and services. And by recognizing that the public sector makes people and communities stronger, we can see that these are not two sides of the same coin; they are in many ways one and the same.

Progressive tax reform

In a recent article for *The Tyee*, Dobbin (2014) proposed a simple exercise. On a piece of paper, create two columns: one with the heading 'taxpayer' and the other with the heading 'citizen.' We have been told by both the federal and provincial governments that current policies are saving taxpayers money. So, in the first column list all the thing you can do with the money you have saved as an individual taxpayer. But consider which tax bracket you fall under in order to effectively calculate how much you can spend. According to Ivanova and Klein (2013), over the past decade lower-income households have saved a couple hundred dollars a year, while those in the top 10% saved an average of over $9000. For the top 1%, the savings have been more than $41,000 per year.

Ok, now that the first column is filled out, move to the second column, labelled 'citizen.' In this column, Dobbin suggests we list what we could collectively accomplish if we returned to the tax levels of 2000 or even 2005. His article addresses federal taxes, so he lists such things as a national childcare program, reduced tuition fees, public transit, and water and education in First Nations communities (with numbers to back up the ideas, calculated by PressProgress, 2014). Dobbin (2014) observes that "for the vast majority of us the first column would be pretty short. But the other list could get quite long for the simple reason that when we all throw a bit of money into the pot, the pot gets pretty big." While this may seem obvious, it is worth pointing out explicitly since our current tax structures (both provincially and federally) are steadily moving us in the direction of column one.

Ivanova and Klein (2013) distinguish progressive from regressive taxes. Progressive taxes are based on ability to pay. Regressive taxes are those that take up a bigger share of income for people who earn less. For instance, sales tax is the same percentage for every consumer, which ends up being regressive because the share of income paid in sales tax is greater for those who earn less. They convincingly argue that progressive tax reform is a just and effective way to address many of the fiscal woes our province currently faces. Put simply, it enables us to pool our resources and accomplish much more collectively, as illustrated by Dobbin, above.

While they offer many potential scenarios for tax reform, Ivanova and Klein (2013) focus primarily on income tax, as it is already the most progressive of taxes in this province. With some minor adjustments to income tax structure, our revenue shortfall could be addressed, and only a small minority of British Columbians would be affected. For instance,

> [i]f the top 6% of British Columbians (incomes over $103,000) paid a fair share of taxes, we could raise $930 million and increase welfare rates to cover basic food and housing needs, support families by properly funding Ministry programs, and restore smaller class sizes in public schools. (p. 9)

Furthermore, their study shows that most British Columbians believe in paying taxes for the purposes of a healthy society, and would like to see increases in the rates of taxes paid by corporations and those in higher tax brackets. This is a feasible and popular solution to what we so often hear described as a situation in which hands are tied due to ‘limited resources.’ By reforming our taxes to become more progressive, the public sector can be strengthened, jobs can be created, and all British Columbians can enjoy access to education, health care, and other social services. There is nothing pie in the sky about this; the numbers support it. What doesn’t is the dominant (though largely unfounded) public narrative about limited resources and mandatory growth.

Asset based community development

When exploring solutions to what are effectively social problems, it is also important to remember that the economy is comprised of *people*. And when dealing with people, we must not rely purely on technical-rational solutions. Anything that involves complex social processes requires that we attend not only to outcomes that can be predicted, but that we also cultivate means by which we might adapt and adjust on the basis of that which is *un*predictable. Current economic theory, practice, and policy continues to treat the economy like a machine and this is where massive errors (that can have life and death implications) often take place. If we incorporate into policy development the importance of responsiveness – understanding that nothing takes place in a vacuum – then we might also be able to weather storms that we cannot anticipate (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2007). So while progressive tax reform is indeed important, and a strong public sector can make our province more resilient, we must also understand that complexities exist and we cannot always ensure our anticipated outcomes.

In addition to well-thought out tax reforms, then, we also need to embody a posture of responsiveness and equip ourselves to be flexible in the face of ever-changing conditions. One approach by which this can be done is called asset-based community development. While many policy discussions are made on the basis of needs, gaps, and lacks, asset-based community development takes as its starting place what is already working well. Asset-based community development is an approach built on the assumptions that a) the assets of a community will outweigh its needs, and b) the challenges a community faces can be addressed most effectively by using the capacities that already exist there, rather than looking somewhere else for answers (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1997).

Approaching community development from this perspective requires the cultivation of new habits, however. For instance, instead of beginning with a 'needs assessment' we might instead begin with a 'capacities inventory' (see Gibson, 2010). This gives a much more complete picture of what is already happening in a community, so that policy makers then know what tools exist to effectively address the challenges that need to be overcome. Another is to partner across sectoral divides (such as government, business, and non-profit) rather than abiding by a provider/consumer model (Gibson, 2010). Engaging multiple partners increases the pool of capacities from which solutions can be drawn, and it also lightens the load (similar to the shared burden when we assume the roles of citizens rather than taxpayers, as demonstrated by Dobbin, 2014).

Working with what is already working well, positive outcomes can be experienced more quickly and resistance to change lessens. This is likely part of the reason Stuckler and Basu (2013) saw such a clear correlation between investments in human wellbeing and economic recovery. Instead of investing money and energy in what they *didn't* have, when faced with recessions certain governments (such as Iceland) committed to pouring their resources into what they already had: the people. With that kind of support, those citizens were able to not only sustain themselves, but flourish. And from there, social and economic life rebounded because the rewards multiplied.

Asset-based community development brings about surprisingly effective and long-lasting results. A three-year study spanning 26 American cities, yielded interesting findings which help explain why this might be the case. The final report of *The Soul of Community* study states:

> The study provides empirical evidence that the drivers that create emotional bonds between people and their community are consistent in virtually every [American] city and can be reduced to just a few categories. Interestingly, the usual suspects — jobs, the economy, and safety — are not among the top drivers. Rather, people consistently give higher ratings for

> elements that relate directly to their daily quality of life: an area's physical beauty, opportunities for socializing, and a community's openness to all people. … Remarkably, the study also showed that the communities with the highest levels of attachment had the highest rates of gross domestic product growth. Discoveries like these open numerous possibilities for leaders from all sectors to inform their decisions and policies with concrete data about what generates community and economic benefits. (Knight Foundation, 2010, p. 4)

There are a wide range of ways to adopt an asset-based approach to community development. Arguably, the most readily accessible way by which our government can do it is with a commitment to investing in public sector jobs. Of course this may mean more of different kinds of public sector jobs, as well. For instance, provincial general government workers currently make up only 9 per cent of public sector employees (Ivanova, 2013), but the *Soul of the Community* study suggests it may be worth bolstering such programs as BC Parks, the British Columbia Arts Council, and initiatives that support the cultivation of welcoming inclusive communities, such as EmbraceBC.

Projecting Forward

In conclusion, I would like to return to the newspaper excerpt with which the exploration began:

> The Clark government has been unwaveringly cautious about giving up a nickel of tax revenue or spending a dime on additional public services because of the lacklustre growth the province has experienced in recent years. And, of course, because the Liberals are loathe to boost taxation — something that would make BC even less competitive. (Yaffe, 2014)

Aside from the fact that taxes play a very small role in investment decisions and whether or not BC is 'competitive' (see for example, Dobbin, 2014b), this position makes sense only if the economy somehow existed outside of society – if it could operate like a machine in a way that did not involve the participation of real people. But we know this is not the case – economies rely on the active participation of the people who constitute them (and of course ideally exist in order to sustain us). Thus, a healthy, supported, and engaged population is not something that can be a second thought *after* economic growth. As Stuckler and Basu (2013) remind us: ""[t]he ultimate source of any society's wealth is its people. Investing in their health is a wise choice in the best of times, and an urgent necessity in the worst of times" (p. 145). To invest in the public sector is to invest in the very people who will participate in social and economic life, and this is the best bet for our province moving forward.

Indeed, without recognizing the connection between the social and economic wellbeing of this province, the current government will nearly guarantee the outcome it claims to be avoiding – a deeper, longer-lasting recession (possibly even a depression) and all the social ills that comes with it (Stuckler & Basu, 2013). If, on the other hand, we attend to the abundant evidence that public sector spending is good investment, and if we develop policies that move in the direction of more progressive tax structures and asset based approaches to development in order to facilitate this, then we can expect significant improvements in the realms of job creation, job satisfaction, income and wealth equality, physical and mental health, *and* economic sustainability

We need to look beyond the numbers in order to better understand the reality of not only the situation in which we now find ourselves, but perhaps more importantly, the possibilities that do exist. "[W]hen it comes to the things that matter, narrative trumps numbers, cooperation outperforms competition, and the search for context is crucial" (Dobell & Walsh, 2013, p. 146). Without this awareness, we are too easily swayed by rhetoric, missing vital opportunities for the creation of healthy and dynamic community economies in the process.

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