
A CANADIAN COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN ECOSYSTEM APPROACHES TO HEALTH WITH AN ECOHEALTH TRAINING AND AWARDS PROGRAM



AN INITIATIVE FUNDED BY THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
RESEARCH CENTRE (IDRC)

2008-2010

PRIMARY RESEARCHERS: BRUCE HUNTER¹, MARGOT PARKES²,
JOHANNE SAINT-CHARLES³, ROBERT WOOLLARD⁴

CO-RESEARCHERS: KAREN HOULE⁵, MARC LUCOTTTE⁶, DONNA
MERGLER⁷, JERRY SPIEGEL⁸, DAVID WALTNER-TOEWS⁹, ANNALEE
YASSI⁸

- 1 University of Guelph, Department of Pathobiology
- 2 University of British Columbia, College of Health Disciplines, Institute for Aboriginal Health, and Department of Family Practice
- 3 Université du Québec à Montréal, Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur la biologie, la santé, la société et l'environnement (CINBIOSE), Département de communication sociale et publique
- 4 University of British Columbia, Department of Family Practice
- 5 University of Guelph, Department of Philosophy
- 6 Université du Québec à Montréal, Institut des sciences de l'environnement, Département des sciences de la terre et de l'atmosphère
- 7 Université du Québec à Montréal, Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur la biologie, la santé, la société et l'environnement (CINBIOSE)
- 8 University of British Columbia, Center for International Health, College of Health Disciplines in conjunction with the Global Health Research Program, Department of Health Care and Epidemiology
- 9 University of Guelph, Department of Population Medicine/ Center for Public Health and Zoonoses

This summary provides an overview of the project “A Canadian Community of Practice in Ecosystem Approaches to Health with an EcoHealth Training and Awards Program” funded by the International Development Research Centre, Canada (IDRC).

INTRODUCTION

Despite important advancements in ecosystem approaches to health, Ecohealth remains an emerging field and the long term development of this approach requires work in consolidation, cooperation and skill development. Today, diverse approaches to health are increasingly grouped under the title “ecohealth”, which attests to the richness of the field, and demands that such approaches to be given careful consideration, as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and sharing of diverse experiences.

Ecosystem Approaches to Health (Ecohealth) have developed in response to recognition that health and wellbeing are embedded within ecosystems. Ecohealth initiatives are characterised by integrated approaches to health and environment issues, where priority is given to participatory and interdisciplinary research that is conscious of social and gender equity. Research in Ecohealth brings together researchers in natural sciences, health sciences, social sciences and beyond, who work in direct collaboration with interested parties, political decision makers and stakeholders.

Many Canadian researchers have adopted ecosystem approaches to health over the past decade, and in doing so, have widely contributed to the development and dissemination of Ecohealth throughout Canada and abroad. The IDRC has supported and financed international research initiatives in *Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health* including communities of practice, as well as contributing to the training programs of young Ecohealth researchers¹.

The growing demand for Ecohealth research, education and practice has led a team of Canadian researchers from three universities (University of Guelph, University of British Columbia, Université du Québec à Montréal) to create a project to develop a Canadian Community of Practice in Ecosystem Approaches to Health (COPEH-Can). The COPEH-Can has received initial support from IDRC and has the following objectives:

- to jointly plan and deliver a course on the ecohealth approach for students and professionals doing international/development work²;
- to provide a forum for Canadians to consolidate and extend the ecohealth approach through collaboration, exchange, and scholarly attention to methodology, pedagogy and knowledge translation;
- to conduct an integrated program of participatory research and evaluation to examine the networking, educational and capacity building outcomes of the community of practice;
- to identify and develop strategies for long-term regional and institutional capacity to support ecosystem approaches to human health, including complementary funding for diffusion, research and exchange.

A CANADIAN COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN ECOHEALTH

Within the framework of *Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health*, the IDRC has supported the creation of the Communities of Practice in Ecohealth (COPEH) with the goal to, among other things; stimulate exchange between interested key stakeholders and to promote horizontal relationships between partners

¹ See <http://www.idrc.ca/ecohealth> or <http://www.idrc.ca/ecosante/>

² Including the management of an awards program for students.

from the South and the North. Many Canadian researchers actively participate in communities of practice with undeniable success³. However, outside of conferences where individuals can exchange knowledge about their research and practices, there have been few opportunities for researchers to exchange information and collaborate about their work in Ecohealth.

Creating a Canadian Community of Practice in EcoHealth will fill this need and provide a sturdy platform that will allow Canadian contributions in Ecohealth research to develop and grow, stimulate knowledge sharing between Canadian and international researchers, stakeholders and decision makers, and improve training in Ecohealth. CoPEH-Can proceeds from the assumption that indigenous communities - and their traditional relationships and perspectives on nature and health - bear particular relevance to our deliberations and actions.

STRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNITY

In order to support the participation and implication of all of the interested parties in Ecohealth, we have opted for a flexible nodal structure⁴ created with the following vision:

- to build the community's foundation with the support of the three initiating university's expertise on the Ecohealth approach; an expertise that hinges on research projects, education, and development projects with Latin American, African and Asian partners;
- to support the progressive development of the community of practice with the participation of colleagues, partners and collaborators interested in the ecosystem approach to health;
- to support the development of regional groups and sustainable studies that aim to inform research, education and public policy of the contributions and ideas that result from ecosystem approaches to health.

Diagram #1 illustrates the planned structure for the Community of Practice. In the centre of the diagram is the COPEH core committee that is made up of the members of the three universities that initiated the project, as well as representatives from IDRC. This core committee is linked to three regional committees (or regional nodes), which are comprised of regional members that are involved in national and international research activities, interventions or training based on the Ecohealth approach. Each node has a mandate to build a larger community by contacting groups and individuals, including Aboriginal people, in their region that are interested in the Ecohealth approach and to set up regional activities that answer to the needs of the participants, as well as supporting exchanges of information across and between Canadian parties and international partners.

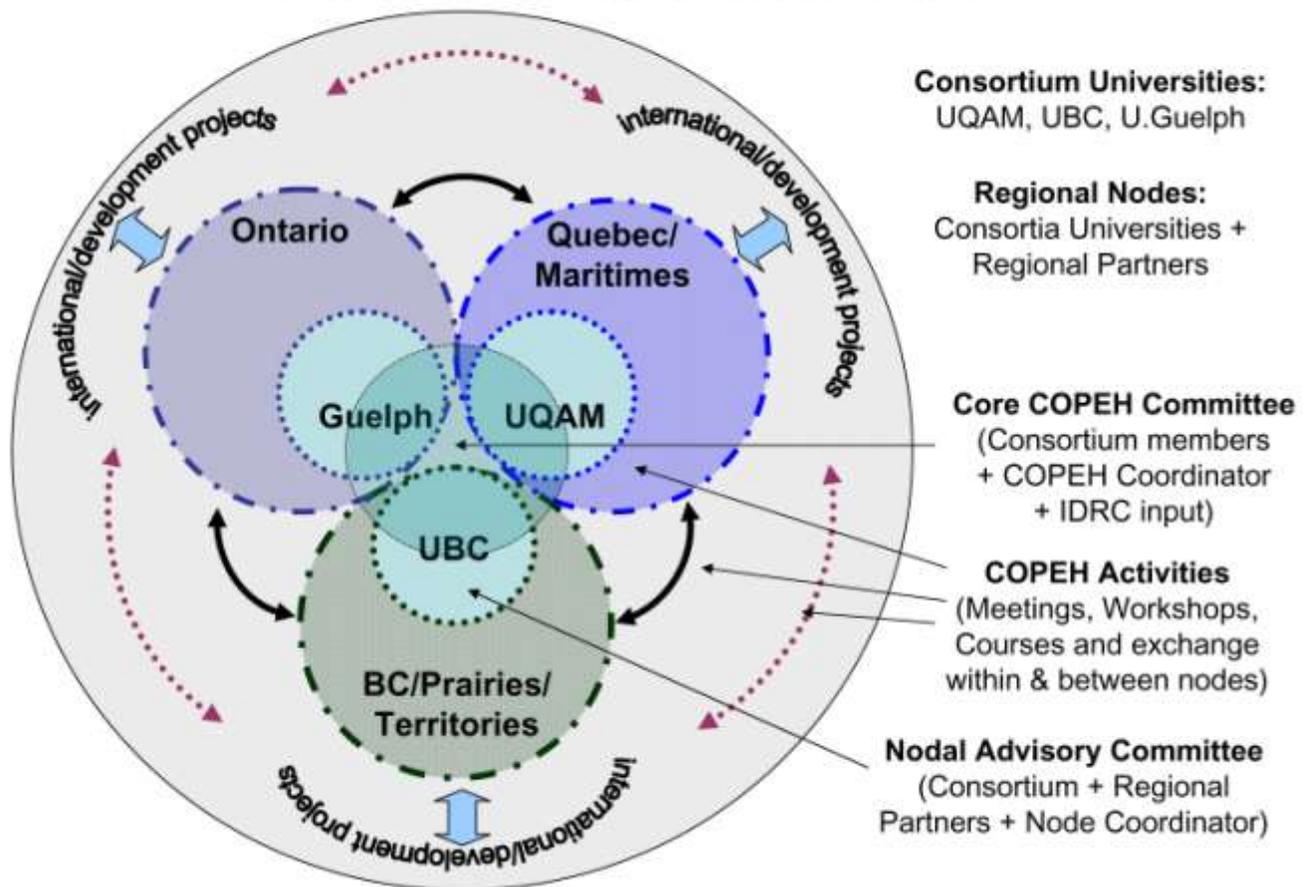
In order to support the work of the members within these committees, four coordinators will be hired (part-time). These individuals will be responsible for performing the administrative tasks associated with the committees, the physical organization of activities, the updating of the community's web site, as well as acting as communication liaisons between the four committees.

³ See http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-101449-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

⁴ The proposed structure was inspired by the success of the structure that was put into place by the Community of Practice on *Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health* – Toxic substances in Latin America and in the Caribbean (COPEH-TLAC) (<http://www.insp.mx/copeh-tlac/eng/inf/index.php>).

Diagram #1

COPEH-Can: A Canadian Community of Practice in Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health



THE TRAINING AND AWARDS PROGRAM

Since 1997, the IDRC has played an important role in training and promoting Ecosystem approaches to health through the Ecohealth Training and Awards Program. Ecohealth scholars are taught about the methods and principles of the ecosystem approaches to health before beginning an international field placement. More recently, the IDRC re-evaluated its role in the dissemination of the Ecohealth approach, and recognized the need for a wider involvement of academic centres and universities in the training and mentoring of graduate students.

These concerns triggered the creation of a consortium of three universities (University of Guelph, Université du Québec à Montréal, University of British Columbia) with the mandate to build and deliver an intensive two week long training course in ecosystem approaches to health, and to manage the allocation of scholarships funded by the IDRC. The scholarship program will be called the Canadian EcoHealth Training Awards Program.

The course will take place once a year and will rotate among the three universities. By the third year of the program supplementary on-line activities and other course work will be developed and the course will be integrated within graduate programs in each of the above-mentioned universities. In order to be able to

benefit from the expertise of the exchanges within the communities of practice, the Consortium has chosen to present guidelines for the course, rather than a course outline. Details of the course will be further developed collaboratively during annual planning meetings and subsequent exchange, incorporating the variety of expertise of the Consortium members and the contribution of colleagues within the community of practice. The training will adhere to the following guidelines:

- utilize mixed pedagogical methods- instructional courses, case studies, field work, interdisciplinary group work, etc. with learning-centred evaluation tools;
- promote the application of the Ecohealth approach in an international and developmental context;
- understand and work with key ethical principles and concepts;
- develop understanding of participatory research and collaborative learning, with the inclusion of key stakeholders, including Indigenous people, and linkages within and between different communities, cultures and knowledges;
- provide a training environment that supports the use of English and French as much as possible.

In achieving the above, the teaching team will maintain a high teacher/student ratio, and will favour a diversity of scholarly traditions including the natural sciences, health sciences, social sciences and humanities.

CONCLUSION

This pan-Canadian initiative is a promising start to the development and promotion of ecosystem approaches to health. Its success depends on its capacity to mobilize the individuals and groups in Canada that already work in the field, hoping that together this group can offer a forum for exchange and collaboration that enhances both individual and collective impact.

For more information, please visit our Website: www.copeh-canada.org