

Establishing a Cluster Table for Women's Community Economic Development (CED)

A guide for Organizations

By the

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC COUNCIL



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Introduction

The following guide and toolkit is intended to provide advice and support to women's organizations that are considering the development of a community economic development initiative called a cluster table. The guide will provide ideas and suggestions that will support a successful launch and outcome of cluster table activities.



Why Would You Start a Cluster Table?

- Is your organizations looking for new options to help sustain the business and operations of your agencies?
- Is your organization considering the development of a social enterprise or cooperative?
- Is your organization looking for new ways to support community economic development in your area?
- Is your organization looking to involve other business leadership in your community sustaining your work while contributing to the local economy?
- Is your organization looking for new ways to support marginalized women with their entrepreneurial aspirations in your area?

Defining Community Economic Development

By: The Canadian CED Network (CCEDNet)

"Community Economic Development (CED) is action by people locally to create economic opportunities and better social conditions, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged.

CED is an approach that recognizes that economic, environmental and social challenges are interdependent, complex and ever-changing.

To be effective, solutions must be rooted in local knowledge and led by community members. CED promotes holistic approaches, addressing individual, community and regional levels, recognizing that these levels are interconnected."

Community is about bringing together groups of people with a shared identity or vision

Community is about a group of people interacting on joint action

Development is about making change, providing new choices and making improvements in response to issues

What is a Cluster Table?

It is a process and way to organize your community in helping each other work towards economic security. The host organization invites women and women's organizations including existing CED entities to the table. The clients might represent entrepreneurial interests or organizational expansion towards a social enterprise or co-operative, or it may represent existing social enterprises and co-operatives that wish to expand their business operations. The host organization with assessment support tools determines what the needs and gaps are for the clients. Then they recruit business leaders from the local community who can come and advise, mentor and support the CED aspirations along their successful continuum. Some of the needs and gaps may result in additional training and information gathering which can be supported by the cluster table through webinars and other workshops. Others may require financial literacy support or financial capital. The table

Usually a local organization that has space and may already be a natural gathering place is used as the hub



can help to coordinate experts in the field to come and support the clients as required -- perhaps giving a workshop on how to do financial statements or how to apply for a loan. The table may be able to use business experts from the local financial institutions or Development Corporations to support this need. The table may be a number of women working collaboratively to organize and develop a community daycare or catering services. Each table experience will be different with different business leaders and community resources coming forward to fill the needs and establish the goals of

the clients. The cluster tables can go for several sessions in a row or be over after a few depending on your clients and their needs. The cluster tables are flexible and respond as required -- a living model that supports the community.

A cluster table meeting can last for an hour or two. It meets as long as you have committed participants and volunteers.

Ultimately the business leadership gets to know the host organization and needs of their community and community organizations so much better. The community and clients of the cluster table get to know who the business leadership is and how they can help build their area. Women from all walks of life get to work in a collaborative, safe environment that supports women's economic security.

The main objective of any cluster table meeting is to move people and their organizations along the continuum of development. Set out some objectives, plan a vision, set a goal for each session to ensure that every meeting moves people towards their aspirations or helps to resolve barriers or support capacity where needed to continue growth. It moves with the participants and strong leadership participation.

Where to Begin

Internal Planning

If you are considering becoming a host organization that wants to organize a cluster table in your community here are some planning ideas you may want to consider. You may want to start by organizing a strategic planning session internally to determine your strengths, weaknesses and opportunities.

Below is a list of questions to consider for your session. You may already know the answers to some of these questions, thereby helping the discussion and dialogue go faster.



- What kind of community economic development could be successful in your area?
- Are you aware of local labour market information?
- Do you know how many CED (social enterprises and co-operatives) are operating in your area? Could this impact on new ones starting?
- Are you experienced in business planning?
- Have you worked with marginalized women and business development before?
- What resources would you be able to call upon (business leadership) to work with your potential cluster? This includes development corporations and non-profit services that could support your cluster - make a list.
- Is there another organization in your community that might be interested in partnering with you to implement a cluster table?
- Could your cluster table further other economic activities in your area or fill a gap where CED would support and advance women economically?
- Is there any regional or provincial funding that could help to support the start-up of your cluster table?

Organizational Capacity/Communications and Advertising

- Do you have staff capacity that can support the coordination and scheduling work required for the cluster meetings?
- Do you have access to organizational volunteers who may be interested in supporting cluster work?
- Can you recruit community volunteers to support the cluster coordination work?
- Do you have meeting space where a cluster meeting can be held?
- If you have staff who will be lead contact? _____
- Do you have access to a refreshment fund to support cluster meetings?
- Do you have a marketing strategy to let the community know you are hosting these sessions?

Website

Email blasts

Posters

Newsletter

Workshop announcements

Upload links

- Do you have a mailing list of potential partners and other organizations you inform or work with to support cluster work?
- Do you know what role partners would play in developing a cluster table in your community?

The Business Case for Business Leaders to Volunteer

The cluster table concept is built on the premise that community business leaders who work with corporations, institutions or small/medium businesses would be interested in volunteering their time to support cluster mentorship. Organizations may be wondering what is the "ask" or pitch to these business leaders to volunteer.

Here are some ideas in building your business leadership volunteer base:

Women's organizations that are host partners operating a cluster table will need to reach out to their community to advocate, recruit and retain business leadership volunteers.

Many larger and some medium-sized corporations will have company policies that talk about "Corporate Social Responsibility" or CSR. This refers to the company's corporate responsibility and commitment to community involvement, and contribution to community development. Large institutions such as banks and educational bodies have such policies. On the corporate side examples would include large national chains such as retail, food industry, and hotel accommodations. The medium-sized companies may have local practices or policies where they support certain community fundraisers such as children's efforts, breast cancer, etc. Many businesses have donation policies where they speak about the efforts their company likes to support or others where they encourage their employees to volunteer their free or paid time to support local community efforts. These policies and commitments will help you in making your pitch for community business volunteers for your cluster table.

The Business Case

- Businesses want to be seen as contributing to community development
- Businesses are starting to shy away from giving grants and donations and instead are encouraging employee engagement in community development
- Businesses that are recognized as contributing to community development often can count on increased revenue, brand recognition and general community support for their services
- Employees who are volunteering create the same business benefits for the employer because community members will have brand loyalty and motivation to shop at the contributing business
- Businesses have an increased understanding of the community structure and needs within their business radius and how this may affect their businesses



Community Business Case

Community organizations that are more engaged with their local businesses and their employees have a number of benefits to consider. These are:

- Increased understanding of community business in the area, their line of business and what they can contribute
- Potentially increased contributions from local businesses

Assessing your cluster clients' needs

Depending upon how you host your cluster meeting you may have one of the following:

- A meeting with various women interested in entrepreneurial development
- A meeting with women's organization(s) that want to start a social enterprise or cooperative or community enterprise
- A meeting with women's organization(s) that currently run a social enterprise or cooperative and want to increase revenues or expand the existing business line
- A meeting of women wanting to start business or community business
- A meeting to plan a number of business development workshops where women and their organizations attend for guidance and support

All of these examples (and there are many others) will require you at some point to assess the needs of the clients coming for assistance to the cluster table. This assessment needs to look at the aspirations of the woman or organizations have, how prepared they are, and what they need to do next to move their dream to reality.

The following grid provides some examples and ideas of how you might go about assessing your clients' needs. This is not exhaustive but rather a sampling of how you could start the conversation.

Asset to assess	Women Entrepreneurs	Women's Organizations starting a CED entity	Women's organizations wanting to expand existing businesses
Experience in business			
Financial literacy			
Financial equity			
Community backing			
Training required			
HR support requirements			
Business Plan			
Research into labour market in the community			
Experience in the field of business they want to engage in			
Family support			
Daycare support			
Transportation support			
Income support			
Organizational governance			
Organizational capacity HR/volunteers			
Organizational certification/business number/profit status			
Track record solid			
Space/infrastructure			
Financial start-up costs			

Sample Assessment Plan

Name: _____

Date at Cluster meeting: _____

CED Plan: _____

Requirements for mentoring: _____

Other Follow-up/Guidance provided: _____

Next visit to cluster: _____

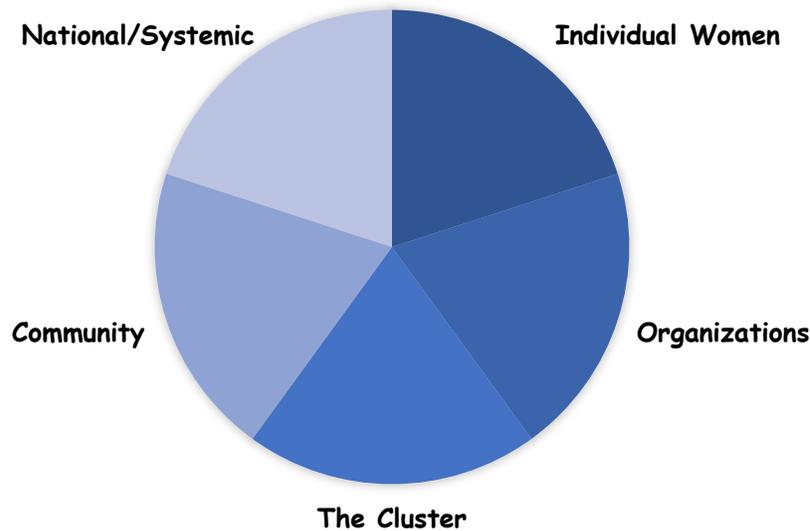
Follow-up and Evaluation

It will be essential to follow up with clients and evaluate the process as you work with women and their organizations. Here are some tips for follow-up:

- Set a date when you will meet again with your client
- Follow up progress with emails
- Send client to website, Facebook page and other social media that will help them to prepare for their CED enterprise
- Have evaluation forms ready for the individual or organizational representative to fill out
- Encourage clients to "self-help" themselves as they wait for mentors to come forward for cluster advice

Evaluation

The evaluation will have observations at 5 levels:



The current “baseline” process is designed to capture a general sense of the current state, as the Clusters get up and running. As we agreed in October, the overall evaluation approach is framed to be organic and participatory - to “Check In and Demonstrate.” Good quality information will help us all to understand what has worked well, and what could work better. The following is a sample from the Cluster Project’s Evaluation Tool:

EVALUATION STARTING POINT FOR THE ORGANIZATIONS IN THE CLUSTER:

Please describe the starting point (baseline) for the organizations in the Cluster at your Site.

Sample information might include:

- How many organizations will be participating in the Cluster? (Give a reasonable guess, if unsure.)
- What formal or informal collaboration existed among the participating organizations, prior to setting up this Cluster?
- What was their status prior to joining the Cluster? That is, how many were in each of the following stages? (Give a reasonable estimate, if needed.)

	Number of organizations
• Pre-Enterprise Development (Personal Interest)	
• Streaming & Selection	
• Business Planning & Development	
• Start-up & Implementation	
• Consolidation and Scaling Up (Growth)	

- What else is important for us to know about the organizations and their status before this Cluster was initiated?

EVALUATION STARTING POINT FOR THE WOMEN:

Please describe the starting point (baseline) for the women who are directly or indirectly affected by the Cluster at your Site.

Sample information might include:

- How many women are directly or indirectly affected by the organizations that will be participating in the Cluster? (Give a reasonable guess, if needed.)
- What was their status prior to joining the Cluster? That is, how many were in each of the following stages of progress toward sustainable livelihoods? (Give a reasonable guess, if needed.) Please elaborate in the notes – for example: What indicators help you to assess the stages of development?

	Number of women <i>directly</i> affected	Number of women <i>indirectly</i> affected (if any)
• Survival		
• Enhancing Employability		
• Exploring Economic Possibilities		
• Consolidating Economic Possibilities		
• Sustainable Livelihood		

- What else is important for us to know about the women and their situations before this Cluster was initiated?

Other Stories to Document

What was a challenge to implement? _____

What worked best? _____

Were there some unintended outcomes? Please describe: _____

How did your organization evaluate their role in the cluster work? _____

How helpful were your volunteers and business advisors? _____

Are there some things you would change? Please describe: _____

Will you continue with cluster work? _____

Is this work sustainable? _____

- Number of women visiting the cluster meetings
- Number of women organizations visiting the cluster meetings
- Number of women-led social enterprise/Co-operative at cluster meetings
- Number of business advisors attending cluster meetings
- Number of return business advisors regularly attending cluster meetings
- Number of staff working on cluster work
- Number of training sessions held for cluster clients
- Number of presentations held for cluster clients
- Number of webinars/workshops held for cluster clients

The questions above are time sensitive and data should be collected at specific baseline timeline and completion time. These are only examples to include in your evaluation framework.

Conclusion

A cluster can evolve into many different shapes and sizes, according to what makes sense in your communities and with your women and their organizations. This is only intended as a guide, not the prescription for what a cluster is or does. Be creative, innovative and socially responsive to where CED can take you. If you have any ideas or items that should be included in this living guide please send them to: info@womenseconomiccouncil.ca

AND GOOD LUCK!!!!