

Building Cultural and Economic Resilience on Fogo Island: A PLACE Case Study of Shorefast

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Shorefast has drawn global attention for its unique, place-based approach to using social enterprise to revitalize the communities on Fogo Island, Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). Shorefast is a registered Canadian charitable organization founded in 2004 by eighth-generation Fogo Islanders Zita Cobb and two of her brothers, Alan Cobb and Tony Cobb. Following the near abolition of Fogo Island's primary industry—cod fishing—in the early 1990s, Shorefast established a mission to build cultural and economic resilience on Fogo Island and to serve community well-being by building and sharing new models of economic development that are based upon the inherent cultural and physical assets of a place.



To date, the organization has built three social businesses: Fogo Island Inn, a 29-room luxury property built on principles of sustainability and respect for nature and culture; Fogo Island Workshops, a high-end furniture-building business that began as an initiative to create locally-inspired furnishings with a global appeal for the Fogo Island Inn; and Fogo Island Fish, an enterprise selling hand-line caught cod to Canadian restaurants seeking fresh, high-quality, sustainably-caught fish. The organization also operates charitable initiatives that support community well-being such as

¹Jennifer Charles prepared this case as a Research Assistant under the supervision of Professor Natalie Slawinski (Memorial University) with support from Memorial's Centre for Social Enterprise. It was reviewed and approved by a designate of Shorefast. Funding for the development of this case was provided by Memorial University's Faculty of Business Administration and by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This case was developed to illustrate the PLACE Model of Community Resilience and is intended for classroom discussion and other learning purposes. This case is not intended to serve as an endorsement, source of primary data, or illustration of effective or ineffective management.

Fogo Island Arts, a residency-based contemporary arts venue bringing artists from all over the world to create and share their work on Fogo Island. Additional programs include the New Ocean Ethic and Geology at the Edge. As of 2019, Shorefast had become one of the largest employers on Fogo Island, providing over 250 local jobs during peak season.

Success, however, hasn't come easy for Shorefast. The team has navigated ongoing cultural, environmental, political, and economic challenges to ensure the viability of the project and benefits to the community. Shorefast's approach to building resilience on Fogo Island can be demonstrated through the five principles of the PLACE Framework: **promoting community leaders, linking divergent perspectives, amplifying local capacities & assets, conveying compelling stories, and engaging both/and thinking**. Through this model we can explore lessons that may assist other rural leaders looking to find resilience in the places they call home.

Hope for Home

Shorefast founder and CEO, Zita Cobb, grew up in a subsistence fishing family on Fogo Island, the second youngest and only daughter of seven children. In the 1960s, when she was just a child, Cobb witnessed the introduction of large-scale fishing trawlers and with it, the dramatic depletion of the Newfoundland cod stocks. She recalls her father coming home one evening with just a single fish from the day's catch, and watched as he burned his boat in their front yard. No longer able to support his family on Fogo Island, Cobb's father moved them to Ontario and never fished again. In Ontario, Cobb completed a business degree at Carleton University. By 1999 she was VP of Strategy with fiber optics giant JDS Uniphase, retiring in 2001 a multi-millionaire at 43-years-old. It was then she turned her attention back to Fogo Island.

By this time, the NL cod fishery had once again collapsed, followed by a federal government moratorium in 1992. Over the next decade, the same job loss and financial devastation that had forced Cobb and her family out of the province, had returned, leaving another generation of families in financial hardship with little choice but to depart from their island home. The Fogo Island population was dwindling, and with it, any chance of the community's long-term survival. It was this all-too-familiar situation that prompted Cobb and two of her brothers to launch a scholarship fund. The fund provided young Fogo Islanders with the opportunity to attend post-secondary institutions where they might gain the skills and confidence to create stable, fulfilling futures for themselves and their families.

In 2006, Cobb returned to Fogo Island to hold a public review of the scholarship. During the session a local woman raised her concerns, “But you do realize that you’re just paying our children to leave, don’t you? You look smart enough. Can’t you do something to make jobs?”². This marked a turning point for Cobb who saw that truly benefitting Fogo Island would be more complex than writing an annual scholarship cheque. She and her brothers decided to launch a non-profit to help build and retain the Fogo Island population through cultural and economic resilience. They called it Shorefast. Cobb knew that to be successful, Shorefast would have to be a holistic initiative that engaged the community—which meant it would be complex, challenging, and it would take time. Time, however, was running out as Fogo Island’s population continued to decline. After thirty years away, this new momentum brought the three Cobb siblings back home in search of a more sustainable way to revitalize and sustain Fogo Island for the long term.

Starting with What They Knew

Cobb and her brothers began with what they knew best: a cup of tea around a Fogo Island kitchen table with close friends. They reached out to local friends and family, spending hours discussing hopes for meaningful change, and collecting ideas for the island’s future. Familiar with the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) and Appreciative Inquiry methods, the team began tailoring their community conversations around such questions as: “What do we have? What do we love? What do we miss?” Through these conversations and the planning process, Shorefast gained energy, enthusiasm, and a dedicated team eager to help turn the tides for Fogo Island.

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One by one more community members joined the initiative. This growing Shorefast team understood the importance of **promoting community leaders**, those individuals who believed in place and were willing to work hard to make it better. Some of these leaders joined Shorefast, while others started businesses of their own or launched community initiatives such as local festivals. As the number of community leaders grew, so did the sense of pride in place across Fogo Island.

²Jim Lewis, “The Possibility of an Island,” The New York Times Style Magazine, March 18, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/t-magazine/the-possibility-of-an-island-in-canada.html>

In addition to engaging with community members, the Shorefast team brought in ideas and people from outside Fogo Island (**link divergent perspectives**).

People from away helped the Shorefast team and other local residents see their place with new eyes.

People from away helped Shorefast and local residents see their place with new eyes. Blending these insider and outsider perspectives brought forth a noteworthy list of local capacities and assets from across Fogo Island's natural, cultural, built, and human capital. They identified local qualities such as a deep love and appreciation of local music, scenic coastal hiking trails, the plethora of empty houses and unused buildings, and a skilled population of talented people including woodworkers, painters, knitters, cooks and storytellers, that they knew made Fogo Island a special place to live and visit (**amplifying local capacities & assets**). Having lived away so long and traveled the world over, Cobb recognized a deep sense of place on Fogo Island, a precious characteristic that she knew had been lost in so many other parts of the world. She believed this quality could help regenerate Fogo Island into a vibrant community—a place worth sustaining and investing in.

As Cobb and her team sat at kitchen tables across the island, another Fogo Island quality emerged: the warm sense of hospitality that had remained unchanged since she was a young girl. It was this deep sense of hospitality and clear understanding of place (including its assets, culture and traditions) coupled with new insights and perspectives from outside Fogo Island, that set the course for the eventual building of their flagship social enterprise, Fogo Island Inn.

Engaging the Community

Though the team's early enthusiasm was motivating, the hard work of building community resilience was not lost on Shorefast. Not all of Shorefast's community interactions were positive. As word of the revitalization efforts spread throughout the island, the team was

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met with some reactions of fear, anger, and defeat. Some local residents were afraid of the changes that would come, and worried that their island would become overrun with tourists, filling the

ferry and forcing residents to keep their doors locked at night. They also worried that high-end tourists wouldn't come at all, that the project wouldn't work. By now, the decades of fish depletion, outmigration, and poverty had robbed many Fogo Island households of their hope for the island's future. For some, it was difficult to see the sustainable cultural

and economic potential that Shorefast saw. It would take more than Shorefast's word to convince Fogo Islanders of the promise of their initiatives. It would take the word of tourists, journalists and other visitors from away who saw the potential of Fogo Island. These "outsiders" started talking to Fogo Islanders about the local assets they encountered, including the rich cultural traditions and slower pace of life. Media articles soon appeared about the uniqueness of Fogo Island, helping to spur local energy and enthusiasm for the place (**convey compelling stories**).

Shorefast understood that bringing together residents—with their deep place-based knowledge—and people from the outside—such as architects, chefs and artists, with specific expertise—could help advance their projects. Shorefast understood the power of **engaging both/and thinking** to create new and innovative approaches to community resilience while hanging on to existing and traditional ways, such as boat building and quilting. Finding new ways with old things became their mantra. They brought architects and designers from all over the world together with local carpenters, quilters and boat builders from Fogo Island to co-create the Fogo Island Inn and its interiors. One of Shorefast's proudest moments was when they offered a free night's stay at the Inn to all Fogo Island residents, and the local guests commented on how the Inn reminded them of their grandmother's home. With its rocking chairs, wood stoves and quilts, the traditional elements of the Inn blended with its modern design, creating a feel that was both "strange and familiar" as the Inn's Gander-born architect, Todd Saunders, explained³.

A Resilient Future for Fogo Island

Since its founding in 2004, Shorefast has continued to work on reinforcing the cultural and economic resilience of Fogo Island. In addition to its three social businesses and numerous non-profit ventures, the organization has developed a micro-lending fund to help encourage the creation of new small businesses on the island. As of 2018, Shorefast initiatives accounted for more than 20% of Fogo Island's non-governmental GDP⁴. Although gaining community support was critical, so too was finding funding to build the Fogo Island Inn, which cost \$41 million Canadian. Three quarters of this funding was donated by private individuals, with the majority coming from Cobb herself. For the remaining funds, Shorefast devoted significant time and energy into securing government grants, which, according to its website, have been "repaid many times over in direct forms

³*Strange and Familiar: Architecture on Fogo Island*, directed by Marcia Connolly and Katherine Knight (2015).

⁴ S. White, "It offers hope," *The Gazette*, December 11, 2018, <https://gazette.mun.ca/research/it-offers-hope/>.

such as income tax and property tax revenues, as well as indirectly through significantly increased economic activity in the region and in the province.”⁵

While some of the challenges and qualities of Fogo Island are place-specific, many are common among rural communities all over Newfoundland and Labrador, and beyond. By adapting and applying the five principles of the PLACE Framework: **promote community leaders, link divergent perspectives, amplify local capacities & assets, convey compelling stories, and engage both/and thinking**, other individuals and teams can enhance the long-term cultural and economic viability of the places they love.

⁵ Shorefast. “Frequently asked questions”, 2018, <https://www.shorefast.org/about-us/#faq>.