



CALEDON
INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL POLICY

Social Impact of the Nonprofit Sector: The Power of One

by

Anne Makhoul

June 2014

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ISBN 1-55382-606-X

Published by:

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Introduction

Thank you for your warm welcome and for your invitation to address this first ever Community Sector Council of Nova Scotia gathering.

I'm delighted to be here with you this morning in this beautiful facility. While educational and health institutions are not considered "core nonprofits," they are part of the larger nonprofit and voluntary sector. From campus to community organization, the sector is about serving the needs of people.

It could not more fitting that I'm here with you in *this* learning institution to talk about the social impact of the nonprofit sector. My family is part of the history of this school.

In April 2006, the Nova Scotia Community College was created by an act of the provincial legislature. Its 13 campuses and six learning centres now function as one. It wasn't just an act of government that created this college. It was the fulfillment of many people's dreams, ambitions and actions. They perhaps began with one small idea that grew – into a course, a program, a campus and, ultimately, a respected provincial institution.

My grandfather, Major James Church, was one of those early dreamers. During the Second World War, he worked for the Canadian government, training young soldiers to be surveyors overseas. When the war ended, he convinced the Nova Scotia government that those now demobilized veterans needed job skills and Canada needed surveyors. His hard work and vision led to the founding of the Nova Scotia Land Survey Institute in Lawrencetown, Annapolis County, in 1948. Jimmy Church passed away in 1967, but I know that his spirit lives on at the Centre of Geographical Sciences, now proudly described as a world leader in geomatics.

Though he wouldn't know the term, my grandfather achieved social impact. He put his skills and his students' employment needs together and kept hammering away for funding until the school could stand on its achievements – its ability to attract and graduate students with marketable skills.

If you ever visit the Lawrencetown campus, you'll see my grandfather's surveying instruments carefully preserved in glass cases. But just as the brass and glass levels he used have been digitized and software has replaced the slide rule, the way we understand the role and social impact of the nonprofit sector continues to evolve. We still use hammers, but partnership and collaboration are among the new tools we use to make change happen.

This conference would not have happened without the recognition of the provincial government that the nonprofit sector is a key player in creating thriving, vibrant communities. The Community Sector Council – like this college – is the result of hard work by many people to have the sector receive the recognition and support it so richly deserves. Also like the college, the Council will create learning opportunities so members can share experiences, human resource and financial expertise, training practices and research.

This is a really exciting time to be involved in the nonprofit sector. There is an explosion of ideas now influencing how groups work together, how the work is funded, how impact is measured and how groups can learn from others to accelerate their efforts. It is also a challenging time to be involved in the sector. Current funding structures do not encourage experimentation. Many nonprofits are struggling to make ends meet.

As economies shift, our environment changes, our populations age, we face many questions. Here are the three that I will explore with you today:

- What is meant by social impact and how is it measured?
- How do nonprofits achieve social impact?
- How can Nova Scotian nonprofits maximize their social impact in this *Now or Never* moment?

A word about the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the stories I have chosen to share with you this morning. Caledon is a privately-funded think tank, fuelled by the energy and passion of three principals – Ken Battle, Sherri Torjman and Michael Mendelson. For nearly 22 years, Caledon has worked to encourage governments to develop sustainable social policy that makes it possible for every Canadian to live full, rich lives. The issues with which Caledon is most involved – income security, poverty reduction, disability, caregiving, Aboriginal education – are national in scope. My stories are drawn from across the country. All highlight people’s efforts to better the lives of those in their communities. My last story focuses on work happening right now in Dartmouth North.

Measuring social impact

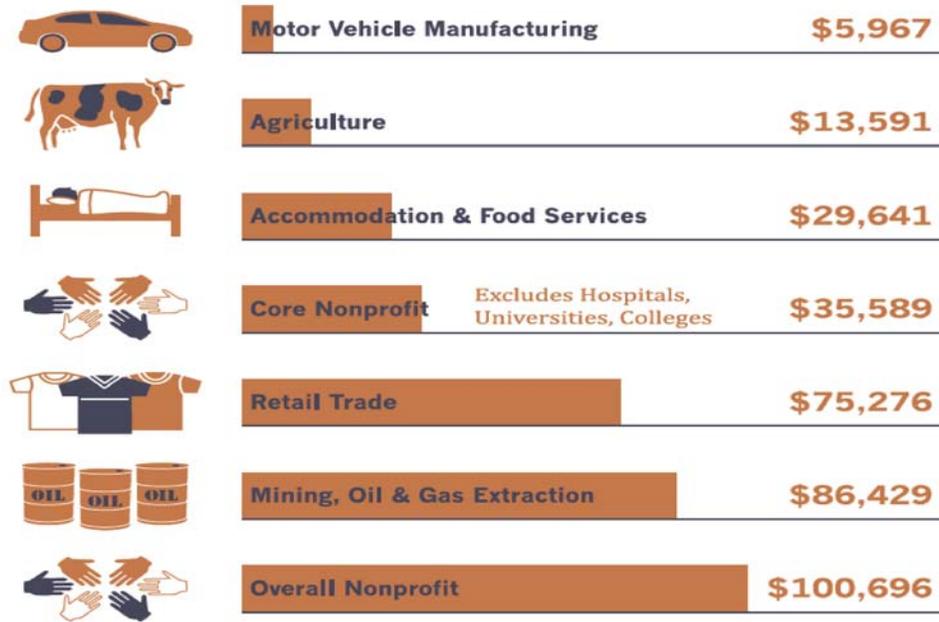
Social impact refers to how a person or a group’s actions affect other people. But in these cost-conscious and cost-cutting times, the term is being broadened to look at whether the actions of the nonprofit sector also achieve financial and environmental impacts. The sector is looking for ways to demonstrate value in all three areas and develop better measurement systems that can describe and quantify impact.

Some numbers: There are 5,820 registered Non-Profit Voluntary Sector organizations in Nova Scotia; 13,000 in Atlantic Canada. Those 13,000 organizations amass \$4 billion in annual revenue and have 83,000 paid staff. For the country as a whole, we can look at part of an infographic designed by the Ontario Nonprofit Network that summarizes the sector’s contribution to Gross Domestic Product.

Contributing More Than Auto Manufacturing and Retail Industries

The Canadian nonprofit sector contributes more to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) than other key industries. The GDP is the value of all goods and services produced in Canada.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 2006
\$ Millions



Source: Ontario Nonprofit Network. (2014). *Infographic of the Ontario Nonprofit Sector*.

It's impressive to think that the sector makes such a large contribution. On the other hand, another part of the graphic that identifies revenue sources shows the sector's continued dependence on the funding decisions of government.

Top Revenue Sources

Ontario organizations rely heavily on government and earned income for revenue generation.

Percentage of provincial revenue coming from each source:



- Government 45%
- Earned income 36%
- Gifts and donations 15%
- Other income 4%

Source: Ontario Nonprofit Network. (2014). *Infographic of the Ontario Nonprofit Sector*.

While the GDP summary demonstrates the financial contribution of the sector, there is still much more to be included in the social impact discussion. How does the sector prove that its activities are benefiting the people it seeks to serve?

In 2012, the Caledon Institute undertook a literature review on behalf of the Community Human Services Network of Alberta. We were asked to identify the benefits of community human services. That term is itself not well known, but is essentially a way to describe the nonprofit sector. ‘Benefits’ were broadly defined to include activities that had a positive social and economic impact on individuals, families and communities [Makhoul and Torjman 2012].

We chose eight areas of human service: early childhood education and care, child welfare, supports for families, family literacy, disability supports, home care, crime prevention and supports for at-risk youth. We discovered that there were thousands of program and service descriptions from all over Canada and throughout the world. At the same time, there was a lack of evaluative literature that identified clearly the benefits – the social impact – of those interventions.

The evaluative literature we did find was based on traditional cost-benefit reporting. Cost-benefit ran into trouble in the 1960s and 1970s. It is expensive to do well. It needs lots of expertise, the right conditions, funders who must be willing to work over the long term and a critical mass of randomly-assigned subjects.

Even the widely accepted outcomes associated with gold standard programs like US Headstart can be called into question by minor cost variances or when the intervention is used in other contexts. A PriceWaterhouseCoopers’ analysis of UK child care showed that even small changes in inputs (e.g., the salaries paid to teaching staff) can reduce robust cost-benefit ratios to zero or less.

Cost-benefit works for straightforward programs, but is more difficult to use for more complex interventions. People debate what qualifies as a cost and to whom costs are attributed. For example, if you were conducting a cost-benefit analysis for a home care intervention, a family might have to pay to have services delivered, but the health care system would view the costs savings as a benefit. Assigning value to measures like emotions or the value of a death or a life is beyond the capability of cost-benefit.

As early as the 1970s, Social Return on Investment (SROI) was seen as an alternative to cost-benefit. But its methods became too unwieldy and it had been largely dropped by policy analysts and program administrators by the 1980s. In the two years since Caledon conducted its research on the benefits of community human services, however, SROI has enjoyed a surge in popularity.

Social Return on Investment seeks to measure a much broader concept of value, taking into account social, economic and environmental factors. Its comeback reflects the fact that we live in an era of accountability and the nonprofit sector needs a rigorous tracking instrument. As Caledon’s Sherri Torjman states in her paper *Social Return on Investment: Strengths and Challenges*, SROI

gives the social field the tools and language to get important issues heard at multisectoral tables where these concerns are often misunderstood, undervalued or dismissed as unimportant [Torjman 2014].

But other concerns still need to be addressed. Questions like:

- Can SROI measure social inclusion?
- Can it capture feelings and thoughts?
- Whose benefits are we striving to achieve?
- Is the success lens created by the funding body?
- Does pressure for results end up ‘creaming’ participants most likely to succeed?
- How does SROI manage the disconnect that often exists between what is funded and what is experienced over the course of an intervention?
- Can SROI account for key developments in the broader economic and social context?

If cost-benefit and SROI are not quite fitting the bill, how else can nonprofit organizations assess their impact? The answer is as varied as the sector. US Headstart assessed cognitive and language development, emotional engagement of the parent, attention to play objects and levels of aggression. The Perry Preschool Program took a longer-term view, assessing benefits such as gains in earnings, reductions in crime and changes in welfare receipt.

Depending on the complexity of the intervention and the number of partners involved, finding the right mix of indicators can take a while.

One model, 14 cities: How Vibrant Communities assessed its social impact

In 2001, Sherri Torjman wrote a paper entitled *Reclaiming Our Humanity*. It offered a vision of vibrant communities that provide support, promote inclusion and encourage learning. Sherri’s paper set the stage for Caledon’s involvement in a ten-year partnership with the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. Together, these three organizations directed Vibrant Communities, a national initiative in which 14 cities were joined together in a learning partnership to find local solutions to reduce poverty.

While each community was free to formulate its own strategy, they all exchanged ideas through a pan-Canadian learning partnership. Tamarack provided coaching, McConnell allocated core financial support and Caledon was engaged in the documentation and policy work related to local efforts. This graphic summarizes the key principles underlying the VC approach.



Source: Gamble, J. (2012). *Inspired Learning: An Evaluation of Vibrant Communities' National Supports 2002-12*.

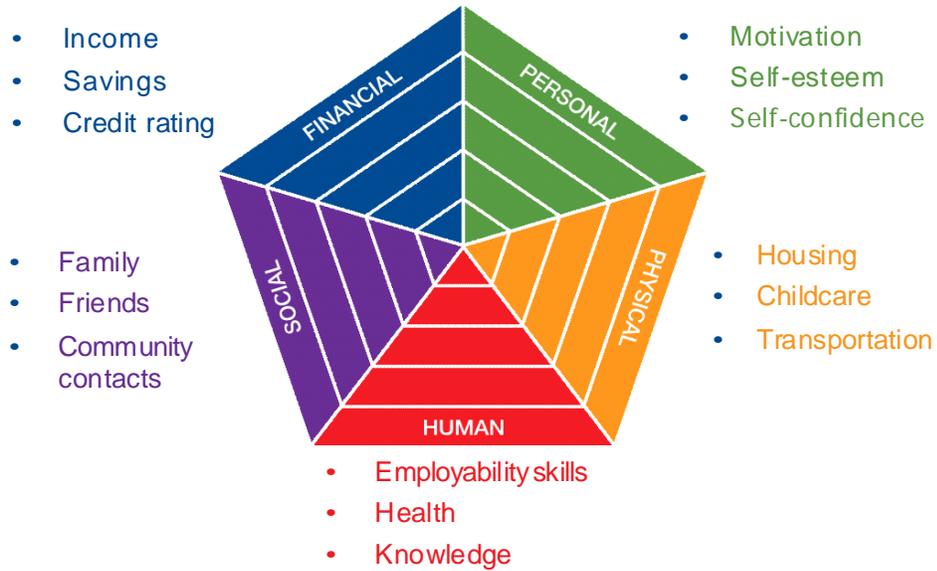
In its first year, Vibrant Communities' national sponsors used a conventional approach to evaluation, using Statistics Canada's low income cut-offs as a basic conception of poverty. Five outcomes were specified as the initiative's poverty reduction targets: increased income, new or improved employment, enhanced education or training, additional financial assets, and new or adequate housing.¹

Evaluators attempted to design a standard evaluation approach that would demonstrate movement toward the stated goals. But because each site was encouraged to shape its poverty reduction efforts to reflect local conditions, it soon became clear that the approach didn't fit. Complex, multisectoral approaches don't conform well to static, linear evaluation models.

Using ideas from Michael Quinn Patton's writings on developmental evaluation, the sites continued to track the outcomes statistics, but they also articulated the theory of change guiding their work and reviewed it annually to make adjustments based on lessons learned [Quinn Patton 2006]. Third, they produced brief stories that documented specific poverty reduction strategies. These three streams allowed the sites to capture the bigger story of how change was occurring on the ground.

By 2006, Vibrant Communities' understanding of the complexity of poverty created a final shift in its evaluation processes. The partners adopted a Sustainable Livelihoods approach, which contends that people need a critical mass of assets in several different areas in order to meet their needs on a sustainable basis.

Sustainable Livelihoods also identifies two distinct types of strategies that contribute to poverty reduction: programmatic interventions that can help build assets – like child care, transportation and affordable housing, and system interventions that address the broader structures and conditions influencing poverty – such as changes to welfare regulations and poor job markets. These types of interventions are influenced by a third: a community's capacity to pursue poverty reduction.



Source: Momentum. (2012). "Sustainable Livelihoods: So Much More Than Just Getting By."

By 2008, Vibrant Communities had designed a "basic outcomes tracking" template using the three levels of intervention and 13 indicators. It had moved from a minimalist framework based on LICOs and five outcomes to a comprehensive framework that reflected a broader conception of poverty. The latest process had the added advantage that it could be flexible to the actual experience of the 14 communities; not everyone was expected to report on all three levels and 13 indicators in their reports.

By compiling the evaluation data collected throughout its first 10 years, Vibrant Communities was able to report that it benefited thousands of low-income families across Canada.

Key Numbers in Vibrant Communities
439,435 poverty reducing benefits to 202,931 households in Canada
256 poverty reducing initiatives completed or in progress by local Trail Builders
\$22.8 million invested in local Trail Builder activity
2,278 organizations partnering in Trail Builder communities
1,539 individuals playing substantial roles including 840 people who are living in poverty
53 substantive government policy changes

Source: Gamble, J. (2012). *Inspired Learning: An Evaluation of Vibrant Communities' National Supports 2002-12.*

This type of work – the work of nonprofits in concert with government, business and people with lived experience of poverty – is hard to measure. But the appetite for creating social impact at the community level continues to grow in centres large and small, rural and urban. Originally described by John Kania and Mark Kramer in 2011 in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Collective Impact is now being adopted worldwide as a way to strike at the roots of the complex issue of poverty.

Collective Impact’s simple rules for complex interventions build on the work of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Aspen Institute’s Roundtable on Community Change and John McKnight’s efforts to promote Asset Based Community Development. Nova Scotia’s Coady Institute at St. Francis Xavier University has partnered with John McKnight to explore many aspects of social change and the social economy.

Collective Impact seeks to bring about wide-scale change using:

- a common agenda
- a shared measurement system
- mutually reinforcing activities
- continuous communication
- backbone (leadership organization).

Where does the energy for the work come from?

Achieving social impact

My experience in story writing for Caledon moved from detailing individual efforts, programs and people to chronicling the fully integrated Vibrant Communities initiative. In every story there is always one catalyst – a flash of insight, a difficulty, a new combination of ideas and personalities – that sets things in motion.

One of Caledon’s first community stories profiled the “Roots of Empathy,” a classroom-based program for elementary students. It has as its cornerstone nine monthly classroom visits by an infant and parent. Mary Gordon’s insight into how empathy can be encouraged has ignited a worldwide movement. [Roots of Empathy video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNvkCt9Pm3o>]

a. Engaging

Empathy was what Saint John banker Bill Gale felt one winter day in 1997. On his way to lunch with some colleagues, Bill noticed a man about his age standing on the sidewalk, his hand out for spare change. He stopped to talk and that conversation changed the course of Bill’s life. He learned that the man was injured in a fall sustained in his job as a roofer. His subsequent unemployment led

him to drink more, which led to the deterioration of his marriage and the loss of his home. Now reliant on welfare, he couldn't make ends meet.

Bill had been involved in community organizations all his career life and knew that a lot of people had invested time and money trying to build a healthier society. Troubled by the fact that a person his age was so poorly served by what he thought was a robust social safety net, he later spoke to Monica Chaperlin, a woman he believed to be an expert on poverty. "If you had a million dollars," he asked, "could you fix the problem?" She answered honestly that poverty is complex.

Several conversations later, the two of them invited a group of business people to meet them at a local soup kitchen. More conversations with people living in poverty brought home the truth that even smart, successful people couldn't fix poverty by themselves. Soon after, members of the group formed the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI) to partner with the wider community to substantially reduce poverty in Saint John.

When Bill Gale and Monica Chaperlin met for that first conversation, they had no idea that it would, in 2008, help convince New Brunswick's provincial government to start down the road to a social inclusion and poverty reduction plan.

In 2004, BCAPI became the local convenor for Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ). In January 2011, VCSJ was named by the provincial government as one of 12 regional Community Inclusion Networks that will guide local poverty reduction and social inclusion efforts.

From the outset, VCSJ did not shrink from setting bold targets for itself. In 2004, poverty levels in Saint John stood at 24.5 percent, 8.3 points higher than the national average of 16.2 percent. VCSJ determined that it would bring the poverty rate in line with the national average within ten years, assist 800 low-income households in its first three years of operation and engage partners from the four key sectors: government, business, community organizations and people with lived experience of poverty.

Some members disagreed strongly with setting lofty goals. They were concerned about the fallout from funders should they fail in their efforts. Despite these concerns, VCSJ surpassed all three of its goals. The 800 household target and partnership goals were reached and exceeded, and the City's overall poverty rate declined substantially – from 24.5 percent in the 2001 Census to 20 percent in the 2006 Census [Statistics Canada 2006; 2001].

Here's where systemic change makes it difficult to assess an intervention's impact. Though VCSJ partners were at the forefront of numerous activities aimed at reducing poverty in the community, 2008 was a heady time in Saint John. The province's plans to become the energy hub of eastern Canada helped insulate it from the economic downturn experienced in other parts of the country. Large energy projects led local employers to estimate that they would need to hire 8,000 new workers in the next few years. At the last moment, the plan fell apart.

Despite the economic ups and downs, BCAPI members are convinced that business must be part of the poverty solution. They organized a province-wide business leaders' conference in October 2009. Called "Activate," the conference was the first step in another series of provocative conversations where the ultimate goal was to strengthen relationships and build a sector-wide understanding of poverty's complex nature and business' role in its elimination.

Bill Gale's influence in Saint John began at the personal level and so it is fitting that his passion and professional example led BCAPI to launch a bursary in his name in October 2010. BCAPI will use those funds to help finance postsecondary education for youth with limited financial means.

b. Encouraging diversity

A truth often quoted throughout Vibrant Canada's first decade was, "You move faster alone, but you get farther together." We also are learning that the more diverse a group, the more creative the solutions it discovers.

The City of Hamilton co-founded a roundtable for poverty reduction in 2006 after a municipal administrator stood up at a City Council meeting and deplored the lack of movement on poverty, despite the city having written both an economic and a social recovery plan. Business, government and nonprofit representatives had an important bonding and trust-building moment at their first ever meeting when every member of the group shared a personal experience of poverty.

But the room was missing anyone with lived experience of poverty – that is, a person who was, in that moment, living on low income. Work was done later to include people from this group, but it took much longer to build trust and connections than had they been involved at the outset.

Similarly, people with disabilities, Aboriginals, new Canadians – all need to be offered a seat at the table. Much easier said than done, particularly when the people making the invitation are speaking from a position of privilege. Whether inferred or obvious, judgments become barriers to trust. Partnership is about reciprocity. How do you build strong partnership if people either can't or won't come to the table?

Ideas for how to make the invitation can come from family networks and relationships that cross divides of race, culture and religion. If people are open, the right idea, the right personality and an atmosphere of respect can create seismic shifts in how we view people's gifts and contributions.

In Saskatoon, several organizations were interested in finding meaningful ways of weaving the experiences of people living in poverty into their work while building mutual knowledge and understanding.

The Poverty Costs campaign – a collaboration aimed at focusing the Saskatchewan poverty reduction discussion – recently used and evaluated two methods for working with people living in

poverty. The first was an inclusion process that involved people living in poverty in team meeting activities and an overall awareness campaign. Participants were paid an honorarium and provided a basic transportation allowance.

This approach was combined with a social justice model that had been developed by Janet Clarke and the Saskatoon Integrated Community Ministry. Janet had heard a US lawyer make a presentation about hiring people with lived experience of poverty to act as consultants. That idea grew into the “Essential Voice” project and has been operating within a faith-based setting in Saskatoon for the past eight years. An individual living on social assistance is hired for three hours a week at a salary that is consistent with extra earnings limits. As the Essential Voice staff member and the professionals involved in the work come to know each other, they share each others’ stories and become one another’s mentors. This approach has enjoyed local success. There are many examples of Essential Voice staff members moving ahead to other jobs, educational opportunities and creative endeavours.

The Poverty Costs project integrated the Essential Voice model into its operations. It hired a First Nations woman to gather lived experience stories, introduce other people living in poverty to the campaign and undertake media relations work. The blending of these two approaches offers a new way for Saskatoon groups to interact. An upcoming evaluation discussion will focus on next steps for spreading the ideas into the wider community.

With long-standing relationships of mistrust or imbalances of privilege, going slowly and working on one relationship at a time may be the *only* answer.

Meaningful connections between people lead both parties to be changed by the interaction. In Saskatoon, the people with lived experience helped illuminate the fact that our support systems are so complicated that many people give up before they start. System navigation is challenging municipal administrators across the country. It is now seen as a structural issue that is central to poverty reduction. The City of Calgary and Waterloo Region both have developed municipal phone services that provide individual help with navigation.

c. Building on the success of others

In a small community, system navigation might be as easy as picking up the phone and calling a neighbour for help. While many of my examples have come from larger urban centres, there is a richness of rural community revitalization work going on in Canada and the US.

Cities Reducing Poverty, for example, is now including small cities and towns in its collection of networked communities. Earlier successes and failures speed learning for those who come later. Members from a region outside Toronto reported that by joining Cities Reducing Poverty, they were able to shorten their poverty reduction strategy process by three years. Cities Reducing Poverty-Vibrant Canada is currently building a library of topics for small and rural communities. <http://vibrantcanada.ca/search/node/rural>

Other resources and organizations that specialize in assisting rural communities include:

- The Rural Development Institute at Brandon University in Manitoba. The RDI functions as a not-for-profit research and development organization. Its efforts to build welcoming communities, research rural youth migration patterns and enhance rural economic development are of particular note. <http://www.brandonu.ca/rdi/>
- Throughout Canada, nine university-based research centres have been working with rural and northern communities to increase the understanding of rural development, policy, and practice. The Rural Development Institute has prepared a report outlining the work taking place in these centres. <http://www.brandonu.ca/rdi/projects/rural-research-centres-in-canada/>
- Wealthworks in the US offers much food for rural and regional development thought. Started in 2008 by the Ford Foundation and others, it encourages people to rethink their assets and connections to market demand. The Wealthwork website includes an interactive game where players build businesses and increase eight forms of wealth: political, individual, cultural, social, built, intellectual, financial and natural. The WealthBuilders game challenges virtual teams of local businesses to build the greatest regional wealth possible. <http://www.wealthworks.org/>
- The Rural Ontario Institute develops leaders, initiates dialogue, supports collaboration and promotes action on issues and opportunities facing rural Ontario. It recently led a three-part rural transportation study that invited Ontario communities to share innovative transportation models. Ten of the 44 submissions were developed into cases studies which will be released on June 16, 2014. Car sharing, fixed route public systems and coordinated community services organizations are among the transportation models profiled. [Three webinars focusing on how Ontario rural communities can access the Ontario portion of the Gas Tax can be seen at <http://www.hclinkontario.ca/index.php/events/slides-from-events.html>.]
- The Aspen Institute based in Washington, DC has developed a workbook called *Measuring Community Capacity Building: A Workbook-in -Progress for Rural Communities*. http://www.ohcc-ccso.ca/en/webfm_send/217

Finally, the Orton Foundation located in Middlebury, Vermont – population 8,200 – promotes the Heart and Soul method to community planning and development. Termed a “barn-raising approach,” it is designed to increase participation in local decision-making and empower residents to shape the future of their communities in a way that upholds the unique character of each place.

Heart and Soul strives to reconnect people with what they love most about their town, and translates those personal connections into a blueprint that serves as the foundation for future community decisions. The website’s short video on the three most important offerings of a community

– openness, aesthetics and social offerings – is another affirmation that small-town relationships and networks are truly valuable.

Video: http://www.orton.org/what-we-do/heart_soul

Working at the grassroots

Heart and soul would be a good way to describe the neighbourhood revitalization work United Way of Halifax Region has been carrying out in Halifax and Dartmouth since 2005. Today, the organization is living out the Ivany report’s assertion that “We can do it ourselves.”

The starting point for United Way’s neighbourhood focus was a two-year, Canada-wide action research project called Action for Neighbourhood Change. Five federal government departments, the Caledon and Tamarack Institutes, the National Film Board, United Way Canada and five local United Ways wanted to find out what would happen if neighbourhood residents were empowered to make change. “Action research” meant that all the players had to be willing to let go of individual agendas and results-based orientations. They had to give the work time and space to unfold. Two years was considered too short a time frame to make significant change – five would have been optimal – but it was the best deal the partners could broker.

Action for Neighbourhood Change (“Action”) sites were established in Surrey, Regina, Thunder Bay, Toronto and Halifax. After one year of operation, each site was given \$80,000 action grants to fund resident-chosen and resident-led initiatives. A second round of grants in year two saw many more projects launched, and a focus on building resident capacities that would allow them to keep the revitalization ball rolling.

In Halifax, Peter Mortimer and Paul Shakotko at the United Way made three decisions that set the project up for long-term success. First, they allowed neighbourhoods to self-select. Second, when the newly-elected Harper government suggested it might pull federal funding for the project after one year, Halifax United Way approved its first Vibrant Neighbourhood Strategy. It outlined a five-year work plan for resident engagement in Spryfield and for one other, yet-to-be-determined neighbourhood. Third, United Way Halifax hired neighbourhood residents as project staff to speed up the process of identifying local leaders, assets and challenges.

Action follows a simple process:

- identify residents who want to do more
- encourage and support residents to get more involved
- provide seed funding, training and other opportunities to develop community-led projects
- support leaders as they step up to change their neighbourhood.

Action’s practitioners have adopted the “do no harm” principle. They are sensitive to groups and people already in place. They begin with small groups and build sustainability into hiring

decisions, data collection and citizen engagement. The two hardest-learned principles of all, from a top-down, funder-conscious point of view are: a) to go slow, and b) be willing to let go control of the work. This is not charity work. It is about doing with people, not for people. It honours the wish of all those not vested with privilege: “Nothing about us, without us.”

In Spryfield, United Way learned that the key to community-level change is to find ways to get citizens out of their homes and involved in activity. Like “Heart and Soul,” Action’s sole focus is to get residents talking about what they love and don’t love about their neighbourhoods. The beauty of working at the neighbourhood level is that it’s a big enough canvas but not too big. The work is place-based and the results are tangible and immediate.

Where some communities might have a richness of nonprofit organizations to whom residents can be directed, the 13,000 residents in United Way’s second neighbourhood, Dartmouth North, had only a community centre and a handful of overly-busy nonprofit agencies. The ground was right for resident engagement. Action tried and failed to get a landlord group together to address maintenance and safety issues in a local social housing project. But from that effort, Action made contact with a collection of parents that later became the Take Action Society. They wanted their community centre to be more than an after-school centre. They wanted a community hub, an activity centre – a space where people could visit, engage and learn. Action offered access to the people and resources that residents needed to be successful. Working together, the dream of a community hub has been fully realized.

As Action has become more successful, major gifts are being made in support of its work. More than \$150,000 in donations has come in over the last five years, and it is only recently that Action has been receiving wider attention.

Conclusion

Action’s lessons sum up what I have been trying to convey to you through my stories this morning. Its proponents believe that the key to making social impact is to build trust. And then build trust some more.

It’s not just about building strengths in people, it’s about building neighbourhoods that are part of communities where people want to live. There is huge potential in tapping into an area’s unique assets and elements. But sharing those riches and building on them brings change, and change means stepping out of one’s comfort zone.

United Way’s Paul Shakotko is convinced that Nova Scotia’s economic power lies largely in the sense of belonging – the social trust – that exists in its communities. In his words: “United Way’s neighbourhood work is successful because people crave to be deeply connected to where they live. They want to be less busy and more engaged in the business of living. They want to be empowered – to influence and be influenced. Only by cultivating such places of connection can we create the happy, healthy communities we long for.”

The success of small communities in the Gulf Islands off the BC coast demonstrate how far people will move in order to find vibrant, cohesive, beautiful communities. Instead of thinking about mega projects or factories, building small economic engines in communities where members look after one another could be an attractive alternative business, environmental and social model.

You have a proud history from which to draw in this regard. Nova Scotia has been at the forefront of novel ways of coming together to protect and promote your businesses and communities. The Antigonish Movement, the asset-based community development work promoted by the Coady Institute, and the leadership you have demonstrated in establishing Community Economic Development Investment Funds are examples that other jurisdictions in Canada are following.

The theme of this talk has been the power of one. One person, one conversation, one idea that inspires a change. As ideas spread, the power of one becomes the power of the neighbourhood, community or province united behind a single vision.

There are also elements of luck and timing in creating change. Over the years I have worked at Caledon, I have seen the way an issue can leap to the fore, fade just as quickly, only to re-emerge larger and louder some time later. When Paul Born at the Tamarack Institute admitted that he had no idea of how Vibrant Communities would work in the early 2000s, he was sharing an honest truth. Today, we talk about comprehensive community initiatives and poverty reduction strategies as if they have always been with us. The reality is that the work of the nonprofit sector is long haul work. And yet sometimes, the right things happen. A fortuitous combination of leadership, funding and events come together in a moment of possibility.

One of the things I do for Caledon is a daily review of federal and provincial/territorial policy announcements. We release monthly reports and enter each announcement into a searchable database. We recently added a Municipal Monitor, which is slightly different, in that we gather information from 15 volunteer reporters who fill us in on their municipality's social policy focus.

When I read the *One Nova Scotia* report, then saw the 2014 Nova Scotia Budget release in April, they looked like mirrors of one another. The provincial government appears to be taking action on every front identified by the Ivany Commission. You may be experiencing that critical moment when everyone starts to row in the same direction.

I will leave you with one last story this morning. I began my address by telling you about my grandfather Jimmy Church. His two sons, Alex and Peter, attended Acadia as undergraduate students, then left to pursue further studies in Montreal. Peter went to medical school at McGill; my father, Alex, enrolled in business courses. Both eventually settled in Ottawa and Toronto in the late 1960s when the business and language climate changed radically in Quebec.

My father would say that Maritimers are like salmon – they must return regularly to their place of birth. He brought us here every summer until his father's death in 1967. Both Alex and Peter are now buried in Lawrencetown; such was the call and pull of home. Today, my brother owns a cottage at Hunt's Point which he is generous about sharing. Nova Scotia is in our family DNA.

But returning for holidays is not the same thing as choosing to stay or move back. Out-migration is a reality, but tides flow two ways. My hope is that you will be able to measure and feel your impact. That you will help build up the kinds of connected, inclusive, trusting communities that will make living anywhere else unthinkable. And that if your children do leave to check out greener pastures, they will come home to stay and build some more.

Endnote

1. The author is indebted to Eric Leviten-Reid for this succinct summary of Vibrant Communities' evaluation history.

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