



Learning and Evaluation for Poverty Reduction

by

Sherri Torjman and Eric Leviten-Reid

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Background

This paper explores the role of learning and evaluation in community-based poverty reduction. It is one of a series of papers written in support of the Vibrant Communities project. Vibrant Communities is a four-year national effort to explore promising local solutions to reduce poverty. The project is sponsored by the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. Human Resources Development Canada is funding the policy component of the work. Financial commitments have been received from several other funders.

The Vibrant Communities initiatives throughout the country as well as the overall national effort have incorporated an explicit and active learning strategy. Selected conveners from 14 cities across the country are involved in a Pan-Canadian Learning Community in which they come together on a regular basis to share ideas, resources and strategies, and to plan their collective effort. These communities effectively ‘scale up’ their individual efforts through this collaborative strategic approach.

In addition, several of the communities receive substantial funds to undertake multi-year, multifaceted ‘Trail Builder’ poverty reduction initiatives. In order to qualify for these funds, they must convene a multisectoral steering group that takes responsibility for the initiative and helps create a community-wide vision as well as a strategic plan with detailed actions. This steering group *must* include representatives from at least four sectors: business, government, anti-poverty groups and the voluntary sector.

Community-based approaches to solving pressing social and economic problems are not new. Voluntary action by citizens and organizations was alive and well long before government programs. What *is* new is the methodology that appears to be emerging at the local level – which is far more strategic than before [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003]. Vibrant Communities seeks not only to harness the knowledge, skills and expertise of diverse sectors. It also has made learning the centrepiece of its work. It recognizes the pressures and opportunities embedded in the knowledge society.

The Role of Learning

Knowledge and learning have emerged as the key ingredients to citizenship in the knowledge economy. They are the foundations for both social participation and economic vibrancy.

Every community, region and country has the assets to succeed in the knowledge economy: its people. But success requires investment in their development – in their basic and ongoing need for

learning. This investment is crucial not only for economic wealth. Ongoing investment in learning is the basis for human development and community well-being.

Evidence from diverse fields has found that the passive model of learning is ineffective. Learning takes place, by contrast, through an interactive process in which the potential users of information are considered problem-solvers.

The key to learning is active engagement with the information through a mediating process that entails the exploration, discussion and implementation of the material. This engagement means that learning requires a foundation of social capital – the relationships, networks and norms that enable collective action [Putnam 2000; Helliwell 2001: 6]. It is created when people come together out of a shared purpose or goal that goes beyond individual benefits and incorporates the idea of connectedness. Social capital is being understood increasingly as a prerequisite for the acquisition of basic skills.

Basic skills comprise the underpinning for all other learning. They enable participation in virtually every domain of the knowledge society. Basic skills are like an architectural foundation. Over time, changes and upgrades can be made to any structure. There is no end to possible renovations – but only if a strong and secure foundation is in place.

Learning is also essential for earning. The knowledge society has raised the bar – by increasing the importance and range of skills considered ‘basic.’ But the bar is changing as well as new technologies continually transform the way in which work is carried out. Higher levels of skills are required than ever before, even in so-called low-skill jobs. The knowledge economy demands a well-educated and skilled workforce – everywhere, all the time.

Learning is a necessary condition for innovation, which involves the creation of new ideas or the application of existing ideas in novel ways or to new fields. But there is more to learning than earning or even innovation. There is now a substantial literature on learning as the cornerstone for personal and social development. While learning is an ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills, it is also – perhaps primarily – an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations.

In fact, the UN-sponsored International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century calls learning “the treasure within” [Task Force on Education 1996]. The Commission makes an impassioned case for learning as the heart of personal and community development. The Commission argues that this process is fundamental to human well-being and takes place throughout life. Learning also can help citizens engage as meaningful actors in their communities.

Finally, there is the notion of learning for excellence. It means that individuals, groups and even communities continually must assess their performance and how it might be improved. Evaluation generally is undertaken to determine whether certain interventions worked or not – whether they were effective or ineffective with respect to their intended results. While this information is significant, it may not be the most important. It certainly is not sufficient.

Perhaps the central question is not so much what works, but rather what was learned from a given effort. What appears to have been a successful intervention? What factors contributed to its success? Why did certain interventions not work effectively? What could have been done differently to ensure a more positive result?

Unfortunately, evaluations typically begin *after* the basic foundations of a project have been laid and the work is already under way. It would be far more helpful to have feedback about performance on an ongoing basis so that interventions which appear to be less than effective might be identified and modified.

Or perhaps the process by which a program has been set up is not operating appropriately or is far more problematic than originally intended. It would be important to know this information earlier than later. Later often means too late.

The new thinking on community initiatives moves beyond a simplistic retrospective. Learning for excellence shifts the focus from one of judgment to continual improvement. It views the world not in after-the-fact black or white but in varying shades of gray. Learning for excellence assumes that mistakes may be made because the course being pursued is virtually uncharted.

At any point, a shift in course from the original workplan may be required and should not be seen as a failure. In fact, no change in direction may be a sign that there has been little self-critique – or even fear to take bold steps. The problem is that most funders tend to envision a straight-line path of project development, leaving too little room for the side trips and circling back typical of a learning process. Sticking to the straight and narrow presumably eases monitoring and promotes accountability. But the path of least resistance may also be the path of least learning.

Learning within Vibrant Communities

The principle of continual learning is embedded in the processes used by Vibrant Communities. These include teleconferences, tele-learning forums, face-to-face gatherings, an interactive website, e-bulletins and coaching – all of which foster and enable peer-to-peer learning.

At the heart of Vibrant Communities is the Pan-Canadian Learning Community in which representatives from the 14 local convener organizations come together on a regular basis to share ideas, resources and strategies. During the first year of Vibrant Communities' operation, conveners participated in monthly conference calls. As some communities moved into the 'Trail Builder' component of the initiative – establishing full-fledged, multi-year poverty reduction projects – the meeting schedule was adjusted. Currently, representatives from the six Trail Builders meet together one month and the full Learning Community convenes the following month.

Trail Builder conference calls focus on the practical challenges communities face as they pursue their initiatives. Learning Community conference calls, on the other hand, provide an opportunity for updates on developments within Vibrant Communities, share insights emerging from the Trail Builder experiences and plan activities relevant to the Learning Community as a whole.

The Trail Builder and Learning Community conference calls are supplemented by other learning opportunities including tele-learning forums and theme-based conference calls. Tele-learning forums are Pan-Canadian events exploring a topic of broad interest to Learning Community members. Three tele-learning forums have been conducted to date on making the case for local efforts to reduce poverty, engaging businesses in community-based poverty reduction and fundraising for social change.

The design of the tele-learning forums has varied as organizers have experimented with different arrangements. However, these events typically link local groups of participants via teleconference to hear a presentation from a panel of resource persons, followed by questions and comments. After the teleconference session, each group is encouraged to conduct its own discussion on the implications of the topic for local poverty reduction work. In some forums, representatives have participated in a further on-line exchange with peers across the country.

The tele-learning forums on engaging business and fundraising actually were designed as more extended events. In the case of engaging business, a smaller number of participants chose to participate in a series of 'tele-learning classes' offered by Tamarack to explore the topic in more depth. The forum on fundraising was conducted as a six-part series delivered over the space of a few months.

A number of *ad hoc* theme groups have been established to discuss specific issues in more detail. Such topics generally are identified during Trail Builder or Learning Community conference calls or through exchanges between Tamarack coaches and communities. Small groups of interested individuals then join in special calls to consider topics such as the definition of poverty, governance structures for Trail Builder initiatives and the development of living wage campaigns.

Vibrant Communities also has sponsored two face-to-face forums, one to launch the initiative and one 18 months later to support the ongoing learning process. Face-to-face forums bring together

a cross-section of Vibrant Communities participants. Each community is asked to come with a contingent of four representatives, including one individual from the four key sectors participating in the initiative (low-income residents, business, government and nonprofit organizations). These gatherings are crucial for building relationships among participants and for the intensive learning that takes place as a result of personal interaction.

The initial forum focused on the underlying themes of Vibrant Communities and whether these themes would be helpful for creating local solutions to reduce poverty. The second forum featured workshops on various substantive issues – e.g., how to identify local poverty reduction strategies that have significant potential for expansion; how to articulate the ‘value added’ of comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction; the use of gender analysis for poverty reduction; approaches to evaluating comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives; and strategies for engaging low-income residents in community-based poverty reduction.

The forum also featured a policy dialogue in which community participants were joined by federal and provincial government representatives to consider the challenges and opportunities for enhancing government/community collaboration in poverty reduction. [For more information on the 2003 Face-to-Face Forum, see <http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca/g2s13.html>.]

Other media also have been used to promote learning within Vibrant Communities. An extensive website has been developed by the Tamarack Institute as a tool for facilitating communication, sharing resources and disseminating the work of the initiative [<http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca>]. The website includes background information about Vibrant Communities and the various supports available to communities. It also features web pages for each of the participating communities.

In addition, the website hosts a Learning Centre that includes a wide range of reports on themes such as multisectoral collaboration, comprehensive thinking and action, and asset building – all critical to the work of Vibrant Communities and similar initiatives. Included in the Learning Centre are papers and tools prepared by Caledon and Tamarack, respectively. Caledon’s policy research papers address topics such as key principles and practices of comprehensive community initiatives, the roles of various sectors in poverty reduction and ways in which poverty reduction practices can respond to the challenges of an innovation era. Tools designed by Tamarack include a primer on convening comprehensive, multisectoral poverty reduction initiative; a poverty matrix for understanding the composition of poverty and determining possible responses; and strategies for engaging business in poverty reduction.

Special initiatives also are highlighted on the website. A web page has been established, for example, for the Gender and Poverty Project. It describes this effort, whose purpose is to enhance the capacity of Vibrant Communities to address the gender dimensions of poverty. It includes links to reports prepared by six local communities that participated in the project. The web page is a crucial

vehicle for disseminating the findings of the work and promoting an awareness of gender issues throughout Vibrant Communities.

Bi-weekly e-bulletins also have been sent since the beginning of the initiative to provide participants with updates on significant developments with community partners and to draw attention to relevant studies, reports and other resources. Some communities have distributed the e-bulletins to members of their networks, thereby expanding their reach and strengthening local organizing and communications. Tamarack recently has upgraded these bulletins into the *Engage!* e-newsletter which features brief articles with links to the Vibrant Communities website.

In addition to these information resources, communities receive hands-on support from a variety of coaches. These coaches provide feedback and guidance on the strategies being pursued by local initiatives and the design of community-based learning and evaluation systems.

Coaching is a critical element of the learning process. It enables general concepts and strategies to be applied to specific circumstances. Coaches also facilitate the exchange of learning among community partners, thereby helping to strengthen local practice.

As Vibrant Communities has evolved, efforts have been made to consolidate the various dimensions of the learning process. A new initiative focused on the strategies that communities can use to help low-income residents achieve 'sustainable incomes' will combine a number of learning methodologies. A tele-learning forum will be held to highlight the major issues and possible approaches for all Learning Community members. A series of peer learning groups will be organized to enable interested communities to explore four key pathways to sustainable incomes: market-based strategies, income support strategies, financial asset-building strategies and cost-savings strategies. Finally, a web page will be developed featuring resources on sustainable incomes strategies and providing progress reports on local efforts and lessons learned.

The challenges

a. Learning

The Vibrant Communities project benefits from the extensive array of resources and materials that comprise the e-based Learning Centre which Tamarack recently has created. This databank is an invaluable resource; it compiles in one place many of the major documents and materials available on comprehensive community initiatives and on local strategies to reduce poverty.

While these materials represent a wealth of information, their mere presence on a website does not ensure their active use. As noted, learners need to engage actively with information before it becomes knowledge – i.e., applied purposefully to a given context. Tools and research papers need to be incorporated into a larger process of animation that facilitates application of the material to local circumstances.

It also is assumed, usually incorrectly, that individuals respond voluntarily to learning opportunities made possible by information and communication technologies. Participation in web-based discussions is a case in point. The theory is that the very presence of web-based discussion groups will stimulate their active use. The reality proves otherwise.

Most people do not join electronic discussion groups simply because these exist. There usually needs to be a designated convener who ‘seeds’ the discussion – asking questions, making comments and providing overall direction. An active online host generally is required to ensure deliberative dialogue rather than the streams of consciousness that often arise in electronic discussions. The passive approach typically does not generate thoughtful learning.

While technology is a crucial enabler of learning, a screen is no replacement for a human face. Even active facilitation and coaching often are unable to overcome the lack of connection that some people experience through electronic communication. At the end of the day, information and communications technologies can complement but never replace human contact. Even community learning networks, which are often technology-dependent, recognize that there is no substitute for a supportive personal learning environment. Vibrant Communities has built several face-to-face meetings into the project in recognition of the importance of this interaction. It is also essential for building trust, which is at the heart of social capital development, earlier described.

But sometimes the factors that enable learning actually have nothing to do with learning. They are the supports required in order for community members to participate actively in any learning process.

The lack of financial assistance for learning and training or even transportation to these opportunities is often a barrier to participation. Persons with disabilities may require accommodation of their special needs – they may require assistance, for example, in getting ready for or in getting to learning opportunities. Parents who lack high-quality affordable child care often find themselves unable to participate in learning opportunities. Likewise, many low-income residents lack access to the Internet and may be excluded from learning opportunities that require the use of information and communications technologies. The mere availability of an educational or training opportunity may be irrelevant if barriers prevent participation.

b. Evaluation

As noted, the processes of learning and evaluation are intrinsically linked. This is especially true in comprehensive community initiatives which inherently seek new and better ways to address complex problems, and whose progress is notoriously difficult to assess.

Theory of change evaluation

One reason that comprehensive community initiatives are hard to evaluate is that the underlying theories on which they are based frequently are left implicit. As a result, it is often unclear how various processes and strategies are expected to lead to the results the initiatives seek to achieve. In the absence of well-specified intermediate steps en route to the final destination, it is often difficult to determine whether or not the initiative is making progress in its work.

Increasingly, theory of change evaluation is being used to help overcome this problem [Fulbright-Anderson, Kubisch and Connell 1998]. In a theory of change evaluation, participants are asked to make explicit the assumptions underlying their work and to specify how they expect the initiative to unfold. Anticipated mid-term changes are clearly identified.

By assessing whether such changes are, in fact, taking place, evaluators can determine whether the initiative is evolving as expected. Regular evaluation reports can help communities explore the strategies they are using. To the extent that the initiative's theory of change is being realized, the insights guiding the initiative are reinforced. To the extent that changes are not occurring as expected, the opportunity is created for participants to re-think the ideas underlying their efforts – in other words, to learn.

Beyond their assistance to individual initiatives, theory of change evaluations are helping to build the knowledge base for the field as a whole. They add rigour to the thinking about complex processes of community change and make it possible for communities to learn from one another. Effective practices can be identified and gradually refined.

Vibrant Communities currently is introducing a theory of change perspective into its Trail Builder learning and evaluation process. Communities welcome the approach as a way to focus attention both on how these initiatives go about their work and on the results they are achieving.

Evaluation for continuous learning

Learning for excellence means that evaluation effectively is (or at least should be) a form of learning for the purpose of continual assessment and improvement. Vibrant Communities has tried to put this principle into practice through the interim assessment of its Pan-Canadian Learning Community. Instead of waiting until the completion of the four-year project to determine the effectiveness of this component, the evaluator was asked to survey participants after one year of its operation. The one-year period would allow sufficient time for some work to be achieved but not so much that it would be too late to change course if required.

This interim assessment identified some important conclusions about the value of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community. For example, the monthly teleconferences enabled representatives from the 14 communities to become familiar with their respective contexts. Local conveners provided updates on developments in their initiatives at the outset of each monthly call.

But because of the number of communities involved, the generality of the reports and the diverse stages of the various initiatives, many conveners found these updates to be tedious and time-consuming. The reports were considered to be only moderately effective for advancing collaborative learning. They did not consistently pose practical issues of shared concern to all participants and allow for such issues to be examined more closely. Nonetheless, this updating process likely has helped establish a certain level of familiarity among conveners about the contexts in which their colleagues are working [Leviten-Reid 2004].

Learning takes time and many people leading initiatives at the local level are already over-extended. Even when the opportunities afforded by the Pan-Canadian Learning Community were seen as valuable, conveners reported difficulty in taking the time to participate. When Learning Community activities were less relevant for local work, it became difficult to justify allocating the time they required.

Another significant theme in the preliminary assessment of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community was a desire for more extensive opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. Some steps already have been taken to create more focused discussions among smaller groups of conveners. But still other methods are needed, particularly among communities pursuing Trail Builder initiatives.

The main message was that as the project begins to move from start-up to the implementation of local solutions to reduce poverty, it is important to shift the focus of the pan-Canadian discussions. While process issues remain important, there is a need to address substantive issues – i.e., specific strategies communities can use to reduce poverty.

Assessing impact

There is more to evaluation than the assessment of the project itself. The Trail Builder communities within this national initiative are required to determine whether their work has had any impact – whether they have, in fact, achieved the goals set out in their respective strategic plans and which methodologies have been particularly effective.

Not surprisingly, the process of evaluating a comprehensive community initiative, even though confined to a designated neighbourhood or region, comes with its own set of challenges – how to define poverty, how to determine that it has been reduced and what level of outcomes to target for success.

Typically, a poverty reduction project seeks to ensure that participants actually have moved out of poverty. However, this challenge raises questions about the conceptualization of poverty employed by project participants. The notion of poverty as an absolute lack of basic material goods, for example, may lead to goals such as increasing the supply of affordable housing. Alternatively, a notion of poverty as relative deprivation may focus attention on achieving a more equitable distribution of resources within a community or nation. An asset-based notion of poverty may help people acquire or maintain assets to meet their needs on a sustainable basis – e.g., through the creation of various savings and other financial instruments.

Even when the traditional concept of poverty is adopted using Statistics Canada's low income cut-offs, measuring progress in reducing poverty remains a challenge. The first complicating factor relates to tracking changes in household incomes at various intervals. Obtaining accurate data about household incomes is difficult for many reasons, including the confidentiality concerns of low-income residents and the administrative complexities involved in gathering data when numerous partners are implementing a diverse set of poverty reduction strategies. These problems are described in more detail in papers entitled *Opportunities 2000: Multisectoral Collaboration for Poverty Reduction – Final Evaluation Report* [Leviten-Reid 2001] and *Are Outcomes the Best Outcome?* [Torjman 1999].

Other complexities relate more to the substantive challenge of reducing poverty than to the methodological problems involved in measuring the extent of change. While a household's income may improve as a result of the local poverty reduction effort, it may not increase substantially – at least in the short term. It can take time for someone who has been out of the workplace for an extended period to establish a reasonable level of earnings. This degree of success may happen only many years after the completion of the local project.

Moreover, the individuals considered the targets of the community intervention may require more than improved education or training. They may face barriers that make it difficult, if not impossible, to be employed without additional assistance.

Still another complication arises from the fact that the project itself may be a success but local circumstances effectively negate its impact. For example, a project may have trained unemployed individuals or ‘at risk’ youth to run a small catering business. But a downturn in the local economy may mean that there is far less demand for this service and the trainees are unable to find employment. Does this mean the training program has failed?

Perhaps the major employer in the community, such as a car manufacturing plant, recently has shut down. Or the primary economic base of the region, such as the fishery, may have collapsed, throwing thousands out of work. In these examples, the inability to achieve the desired outcome of reducing poverty was due to factors beyond the control of the community, let alone the individual project. The fact that the local poverty reduction effort may have helped significant numbers upgrade their education or training is a positive step in the long run. But its impact may not show up in the immediate statistics if the broader context is negative.

A related factor has to do with overall resilience. The poverty rate of a given neighbourhood or region may have risen overall because of a major economic shock. Perhaps the strategic planning for poverty reduction will have a positive long-term effect by contributing to the resilience of this community. Maybe the fact that the community has engaged in discussions regarding the scope and spectrum of poverty reduction will help protect it against total collapse. It will be able to rebound sooner and faster as a result of this process.

It is almost impossible to quantify the impact of this ‘immunization.’ How is it possible to determine that the current investment actually serves a protective function for the future? We rarely think about resilience – let alone how to assess it.

Further, evaluations typically focus upon the achievement of goals. There is no question that complex community and public policy initiatives must have a clear sense of what they are seeking to achieve. But often the quest for hard and fast results means that community processes end up ‘creaming’ – or selecting as participants in their programs those most likely to succeed. Yet it is precisely the individuals who are vulnerable and marginalized who most require these efforts.

Finally, the research for measurable outcomes often overlooks the important changes to community process. Comprehensive community initiatives are invaluable in that they create structures which enable the community to reduce poverty, change policy and introduce innovation. Significant ‘process outcomes’ may have been achieved in terms of clarifying community goals, encouraging

citizen participation and building community action. Individual community members may feel less socially isolated, may have improved their skills and may feel more confident about learning.

Process indicators also can capture the extent to which the community has created new relationships and associations – its social capital. Through the network of bonds and trust that it creates, social capital contributes to social cohesion, especially in light of economic developments driving a wedge between rich and poor families as well as rich and poor nations.

Community-level results include the expansion of the local leadership base and of citizen participation, more generally. They involve the development of a widely shared vision and understanding of a strategic community agenda with markers to identify tangible progress toward goals. Better resource utilization by the community is another system-wide outcome that, in turn, can result in more effective organizations and institutions.

But while evaluation is fraught with complexities and challenges, there is no getting away from the fact that funders are seeking demonstrable results. The federal government, for example, has made clear its interest in results in order to demonstrate that its investments of public tax dollars have made a difference. The Treasury Board document, *Results for Canadians*, uses these very words:

A modern management agenda requires managers to look beyond activities and outputs to focus on actual results – the impacts and effects of their programs. Managing for results requires attention from the beginning of an initiative to its end. It means clearly defining the results to be achieved, delivering the program or service, measuring and evaluating performance and making adjustments to improve both efficiency and effectiveness. It also means reporting on performance in ways that make sense to Canadians [Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2002].

The challenge that arises is how to pursue long-term outcomes whose results may not be observed for many years – perhaps not even for a generation. It is essential to recognize that the evaluation processes employed for comprehensive community initiatives must match the complexity of the efforts they are engaged in assessing.

Identifying pathways and determining progress

It may not be possible to achieve long-term outcomes in a short period of time. But it is entirely feasible to embark upon a pathway that leads in the direction of the desired change and to identify the appropriate markers along the way.

A community-based project may not be able to guarantee that specific numbers of households have moved out of poverty. But it definitely *can* commit to helping these households take meaningful

steps toward that goal. This outcome would represent an entirely reasonable expectation on the part of funders and a feasible goal for a community project.

There are actually a variety of pathways out of poverty. One route is to enhance individual employability. Another is to create employment opportunities by increasing the supply of jobs or available work. A third route out of poverty is to ensure the availability of decent affordable housing in order to reduce substantially the costs of accommodation – the most substantial proportion of a household’s budget.

These pathways are concerned primarily with individuals or households. Two other pathways are also possible. One is to focus upon employers in the private, government and voluntary sectors to encourage them to pay decent wages. Another is to ensure that various income security programs deliver benefits that are higher than poverty levels and that Canadians who are potentially eligible for these programs are aware of their existence.

One conceptualization of poverty pathways is based on a framework set out in the document *Can Communities Reduce Poverty?* The framework identified four streams of local solutions to reduce poverty: meeting basic needs, removing barriers, developing skills and promoting economic development [Torjman 1998].

In the first area, meeting basic needs is concerned with physical security, and physical and mental health. Physical security refers to food, housing/utilities (heat and light), clothing, clean water and sanitation, and protection from violence and physical/sexual abuse. A focus on physical and mental health includes health care services and programs that promote early childhood development and stimulation; build self-esteem; provide counselling; and treat alcohol and drug abuse.

It is almost impossible for individuals to learn new skills or look for work when they are worried about where their next meal will come from or about an impending eviction notice. It is equally difficult to concentrate on employability enhancement if physical security is imperiled by actual or threatened violence. Basic needs must first be met.

Poverty reduction also involves a second stream of activity: *removing barriers* that prevent participation in training and work. Access to high-quality, affordable child care is essential. Some people require assistance with health- and work-related costs. The needs of persons with disabilities must be accommodated. Transportation may be inaccessible or unavailable.

New Canadians often are unemployed not because of lack of skills but because the training they acquired offshore is not recognized in Canada. Remedies to this problem are presented in the report *Fulfilling the Promise: Integrating Immigrant Skills into the Canadian Economy* [Alboim and Maytree Foundation 2002]. The US-based Aspen Institute currently is undertaking a national

project on racism, citing this problem as a major structural barrier in the struggle against poverty [<http://www.aspeninstitute.org/index.asp?bid=1246>].

These first two streams of activity effectively comprise the foundation of the subsequent building blocks. Problems in these streams must be resolved (or at least reduced substantially) before an individual or household can participate over the longer term in the third or fourth streams, both of which focus upon the labour market.

The third category, building skills, includes the range of activities that prepare individuals to participate in the labour market. Some people require basic life skills training prior to job training or paid employment. Programs focused on language skills or on literacy and numeracy skills are also prerequisites to employment. Job search involves assessing current skills, preparing résumés, self-marketing and acquiring information on job vacancies. Building skills entails academic upgrading and job training – e.g., computer training, data processing and trades, such as carpentry or electronics. Training may lead some participants to immediate jobs; in other cases, they may seek financial or technical assistance to create their own employment.

Promoting economic development also helps reduce poverty. This stream of work includes job creation and retention, self-employment, access to capital and technical assistance. Job creation involves the development of small business, worker co-operatives and self-employment. Access to capital has been identified as a major barrier to starting small and community-based business. Technical assistance may be required in community and business planning, marketing and financing, enterprise management, investment mechanisms, institution-building, human resource and board development, trade opportunities and information technology.

Activity in the employability and employment development categories does not necessarily mean that a household will be able to move out of poverty. A family which leaves welfare for paid work, for example, may find that the job does not pay a decent wage. Or the employment may consist of only a limited number of hours of work that together do not comprise an adequate wage.

It is also possible that the employment does not provide health- or disability-related benefits. The wages may be higher than welfare but the household may have to pay hundreds or even thousands of dollars for special needs that would have been covered under that program of income assistance. The availability of extended health care benefits to those considered working poor is a larger policy question that needs to be addressed at the national level [Battle and Torjman 2002].

At the end of the day, the household may not actually move above the poverty line during the relatively short lifespan of a community project. But at least the individual or family will be on the right track – an essential element for evaluative purposes.

As noted, another pathway out of poverty is to target employers rather than the individuals or households living in poverty. Employers can be encouraged to pay decent wages and ensure sufficient numbers of hours so that payments add up to a reasonable income.

Since the mid-1990s, a living wage movement has been gaining momentum across North America and elsewhere. While somewhat new to Canada, this movement is particularly strong in the US. Hundreds of businesses voluntarily have adopted living wage covenants. Cities, counties and school districts in 24 states have established at least 62 living wage ordinances. These require that employers who receive contracts or financial support from local governments pay their workers a 'living wage.' While the wage level varies from one jurisdiction to another, the rate typically is well above the prevailing minimum wage [Employment Policy Foundation 2003].

Employers also can offer benefits in the form of health, dental and disability insurance. Pro-rated benefits can be made available to employees working less than full time. As noted, the provision of health-related benefits is crucial, especially for workers trying to make the transition from welfare to work.

Employers can be encouraged to promote employability or minimize job loss. As individuals, they can be approached to create apprenticeships or hire people who have been involved in training programs. As a group, employers can be made aware of the impact that layoffs, downsizing and other employment practices have upon poverty – and more broadly upon the health of the local economy.

At the policy level, changes can be effected that would raise the level of benefits within a given income security program. In addition, information campaigns can be undertaken to make recipients aware of the benefits to which they are entitled. A campaign in Waterloo Region, for example, was developed by Opportunities 2000 in response to the fact that many senior citizens who were eligible for but not receiving the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), a monthly benefit paid to low-income seniors. This work built on the initial project developed at St. Christopher's House in Toronto [<http://www.stchrishouse.org>].

Opportunities 2000 convened a group of community partners to inform seniors about the GIS and to train 85 community members help seniors apply for the supplement. As a result, 636 seniors successfully applied for and received the GIS. Eligible seniors in Waterloo Region now benefit from an additional \$2.6 million per year [Rogers 2003].

In short, there are at least six major pathways out of poverty that community initiatives can pursue: meeting basic needs including the provision of affordable housing, reducing barriers to employment, building skills, creating jobs, ensuring adequate wages and raising income security benefits (or at least ensuring access to the benefits already in place).

Each pathway involves a different set of activities. In some cases, the target is the individual or household. In other cases, the focus is upon the supply of jobs or affordable housing units. Other efforts focus upon the community context, such as the presence of racism or the degree of accommodation. Changes are being sought as well in employment policies or income security programs.

The challenge that Vibrant Communities faces at this point is to understand in more depth the various pathways that communities have identified. It will be essential to chart the major steps along such pathways and to determine which benchmarks are particularly relevant.

There are two main measures of progress that must be assessed in this work: the qualitative and quantitative components. The first has to do with the type of actions communities actually take and the impact of these actions. The second dimension concerns the scope of the actions or the numbers of people, jobs or housing units affected.

With respect to the substantive issue, the work undertaken must be seen to be a necessary step in reducing poverty. The challenge is to determine whether it is sufficient. We can do this by combining what we know from relevant literature, from practice and from what participants in the projects identify as important.

A comprehensive community initiative may seek to reduce poverty, for example, by helping unemployed individuals gain access to suitable work clothes or tools. This activity would be seen as necessary but it would not be sufficient in terms of a major poverty reduction initiative. The project would have to demonstrate that this work was a key step in an overall process – possibly including training, academic upgrading and assistance linking to the labour market – that leads to new or improved employment.

Ideally, follow-up support also would be provided to ensure the continuity of the arrangement. Unfortunately, this kind of assistance is rarely in place. Funds that support employability often fail to include follow-up assistance, despite its success in ensuring attachment to the labour market.

Setting benchmarks for progress

In assessing the effectiveness of various initiatives, it is first important to identify the pathway(s) upon which the community has chosen to focus. It is then essential to ensure that the projects are embarking upon the major steps that comprise that particular trajectory and to document the results. Projects that seek to enhance employability could chart the following:

- work on the removal of barriers – type and impact of intervention
- upgrading of skills or increase in the level of education

- change in source of income (if applicable)
- increase in level of income.

Ideally, the project should move through the various steps to reach the objective of higher income. If the initiative can go only to the second stage of reducing barriers, then it should make a case for why it is working at that level – for some or even all participants. A given project may have targeted individuals who require such extensive assistance that it may take years for them to reach a certain level of employability. In fact, it is possible that for some people, such as those who are homeless or persons with severe disabilities, employability is not a reasonable goal. Stabilization in the community or an improved quality of life may be more appropriate objectives.

The US-based Aspen Institute identifies several economically disadvantaged groups that could benefit from selected community-based poverty reduction measures: working poor, unemployed, persistently unemployed, dependent poor (e.g., welfare recipients) and the indigent [O'Regan and Conway 1993: 6-9]. The working poor and unemployed would benefit from certain strategies, such as small business creation and capital for self-employment. Training and supports, such as child care and workplace accommodation, may be more feasible for the persistently unemployed and dependent poor. By contrast, those deemed indigent, such as homeless persons, require assistance with basic needs, shelter and possibly mental health or substance abuse services before considering employment.

This strategic approach means that the selected strategies must be appropriate to the identified target group. But this matching raises an evaluative issue as to the numbers that are possible to achieve. Unfortunately, there is no correct answer to this question. The challenge is made all the more difficult by the fact that there are no commonly accepted benchmarks for this practice.

The work that needs to be done at this point is to identify reasonable targets. One way to do this is to survey a range of community groups currently involved in some of these pathways and determine what they consider to be a suitable amount of time to reach certain goals.

It might be desirable, for example, to ask several groups involved in training or literacy development how long it typically takes for participants to complete a training program or to attain a certain level of literacy. It then might be possible to set some realistic benchmarks with respect to what communities can achieve in a specified period – recognizing that the results will be affected by the state of the local economy and other factors, such as the availability of affordable child care.

It also would be helpful to survey several groups involved in the establishment of nonprofit and co-operative housing to determine how long it typically takes to put in place a certain number of housing units. Clearly, the ability of these organizations to achieve their goals will depend upon current zoning regulations, the state of the economy and many other factors. At the very least, however, such a survey would provide helpful parameters as to what is realistic in terms of 'low end' and 'high end' achievement.

Another principle to be explored is whether targets should be set on a national scale with communities comparing themselves to each other or whether community progress should be measured against itself. Economic and social circumstances, provincial policies and municipal by-laws vary so widely across the country that it may be unrealistic to expect communities to achieve the same level of progress even when they are working in similar areas, such as expanding the supply of affordable housing.

It may be more appropriate to set expectations and assess the progress that communities make against their own benchmarks rather than those of communities in other parts of the province or even in a different jurisdiction.

Say, for example, that a given community has a certain number of families in need of affordable housing. The community also has a designated number of available housing units. The ratio of households in need to the numbers of available units is the baseline. It then would be best to set a target ratio deemed reasonable within the context of that community. The strategic plan could seek to increase the supply of affordable housing, for instance, by 10 percent or 'x' units per year for the next four years.

Finally, it should be noted that some of the pathways out of poverty upon which communities may decide to embark represent very long-term investments. The benefits may not be seen for many years – or even a generation. This work includes projects that focus, for example, upon early childhood development.

In this case, the project itself will not be able to demonstrate measurable outcomes. But it certainly can track reasonable outputs – e.g., the numbers of young teenage mothers who return to and complete high school. While this indicator is only a benchmark along the way, the research evidence from longitudinal surveys of child development substantiates its significance.

A recent analysis, for example, of the National Longitudinal Survey on Children and Youth found that five key factors contribute to childhood vulnerability. These factors include, in the following order: low maternal education, teenage motherhood, low family income, single parenthood and low paternal occupational status. Only one factor – low maternal education – was found to have an 'attributable risk' of more than 10 percent. Attributable risk refers to the proportion of the total occurrence of vulnerability that can be attributed to a particular risk factor [Willms 2002: 89-90].

With these kinds of long-term interventions, the evaluation must draw upon lessons from empirical evidence. The expectations as to what is reasonable to achieve are extrapolated not so much from practice but from research.

Conclusion

The Vibrant Communities project has made clear that the processes of learning and evaluation are intrinsically linked. We also have learned that when it comes to evaluation, in particular, there are no fast or easy answers.

The best we can do at this stage of our learning about comprehensive community initiatives is to glean as much relevant information as possible from both research evidence and practice. This evidence helps set out the steps to be taken on the pathway out of poverty. These steps can then be used as markers for assessing progress. Equally importantly, they can enhance our learning about the interventions that appear to be effective in achieving a difficult and complex goal: reducing poverty.

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