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SOCIAL POLICY

Reflections on Vibrant Communities

by

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March 2004

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The author gratefully acknowledges the financial contribution of the Social Development Partnerships Program of Human Resources Development Canada in support of this work. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of Human Resources Development Canada.

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ISBN 1-55382-089-4

Published by:

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Reflecting on the first 18 months of the Vibrant Communities experience, there is good news and bad news. The good news is that the hard work is well under way; the bad news is, it has only just begun! No one ever said that bringing about far-reaching changes in social and economic life would be easy – and it isn't. But it isn't impossible either.

Perhaps the most remarkable development of the past year and a half is the sheer number and variety of people who have responded to the idea of building 'vibrant communities.' The hope people bring to the process is a tremendous resource in itself. Our challenge is to turn these aspirations into outcomes.

The Face-to-Face Forum held in Guelph, Ontario, from September 22-24, 2003, provided an opportunity for participants in Vibrant Communities to reflect together on our experience in order to sharpen our focus and refine our strategies. The aim of this paper is to capture some of the key lessons and observations from the early days of Vibrant Communities.

A Brief Recap

A great deal of work has been done by the many partners in Vibrant Communities since its launch – far too much to review in detail. The basic infrastructure of the initiative was put in place – from interactive website to teleconferencing system – and the Pan-Canadian Learning Community began operating through monthly convenor conference calls, tele-learning events, research and coaching. Six communities decided to pursue the Trail Builder component of Vibrant Communities (with others considering this option) and began laying the groundwork for multifaceted, multi-year poverty reduction initiatives.

A joint fundraising strategy also was developed to build the capacity of local initiatives and secure the resources needed to support our work. A 'policy dialogue' was undertaken with representatives from federal government departments. Research papers and capacity-building tools were prepared and disseminated, and a Gender and Poverty Project was launched. A learning and evaluation framework was formulated with the help of Trail Builder communities and a preliminary assessment of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community was undertaken with input from local convenors and sponsors.

It would be easy in the midst of so much activity to lose sight of the big picture and the purpose that holds it together. During the Face-to-Face Forum, participants had the opportunity to step back from the various components of our work and consider the whole: How do all of these pieces fit together? What factors keep them from aligning as perfectly as we imagine that they should?

‘Aligning’ – bringing groups into correct position relative to one another – seems an apt description of the Vibrant Communities challenge. Whether across sectors (nonprofit, business, government and low-income), across levels (Pan-Canadian and local; federal, provincial and municipal) or across substantive issues (such as employment, housing, transportation and child care), how do we better link our diverse efforts so as to create communities that work for all their members? What is the new weave of economic and social arrangements that makes for dynamic, equitable and inclusive – vibrant – communities?

While it is perhaps too early in the process to offer any grand conclusions, there are many starting points for making sense of the work in which we are engaged. The following sections briefly present some of the lessons and challenges evident in the initiative to date. These will be discussed under three broad headings: framing our work, Pan-Canadian learning and organizing community initiatives.

Framing Our Work

Local conveners report that one of the major challenges they encounter in pursuing this work is how to articulate it to others – sometimes even to themselves. What is the approach we are pursuing? How does it add to what is already happening in the community? Although local working groups have had considerable success presenting the key themes being explored in Vibrant Communities (poverty reduction versus alleviation, comprehensive thinking and action, multisectoral collaboration, community asset building, community learning and change), a number of ambiguities and tensions warrant consideration.

What is the added value of these initiatives?

While seeking partners for their poverty reduction initiatives, organizers have been pressed to explain how their initiatives are different from, and contribute to, the efforts to counter poverty that are already taking place in their communities. In Niagara, for instance, it has been important to point out that Opportunities Niagara would not duplicate the work of existing agencies but serve as a catalyst, broker and facilitator to enhance current efforts. In Saint John, participants in an early community consultation process observed that there already was substantive poverty-related work under way in the city. Some wondered if a new initiative might drain resources from existing efforts. In the end, however, it was agreed that a structure which could bring together all the pieces in a more concerted effort would improve the effectiveness of every participant.

Despite these positive examples, local organizers continue to face challenges distinguishing the role of the proposed initiative from the work of other bodies. In some cases, the emphasis on poverty reduction versus alleviation resonates with community members. In others, the need to engage partners from diverse sectors, especially the business community, is important. In still other communities, it is the effort to address simultaneously the interdependent factors which contribute to poverty that is of special interest. There is a need to articulate the distinct contribution of these initiatives and to hone that message for different audiences.

What do we mean by poverty and poverty reduction?

There is some reluctance to explore our understanding of poverty and poverty reduction, despite its obvious importance to our work. There may be for good reason for this reluctance. No one is interested in entering prolonged debates about the preferred way to calculate the poverty line or the most important causes of poverty. We have a broadly shared understanding that income (whatever the precise level) is only one dimension of what it means to live in poverty and that poverty is a complex phenomenon with many contributing factors.

Despite the complexities, there are ways of thinking about poverty that align particularly well with the key approaches we are pursuing in Vibrant Communities. A number of Trail Builder communities are making use of an asset-based conceptualization of poverty as a way to structure their initiatives [Murray and Ferguson 2001]. The Policy Dialogue has explored the notion of social and economic exclusion as an alternative to conceptualize poverty [Guildford 2000]. These and other ways of thinking about poverty have implications for the types of poverty reduction strategies our communities employ and for the kinds of benefits low-income households experience. Closer examination of how we understand poverty may be needed to facilitate our collaboration and mutual learning.

Is poverty reduction the frame of choice?

While some communities have embraced the language of poverty reduction, others have framed their work in different ways.

Three of the seven organizations that have moved beyond the exploratory stage embrace the language of poverty reduction. Opportunities Niagara, Vibrant Communities Saint John and Opportunities 2000 describe their missions as ‘reducing poverty.’

Several organizations have found the words ‘poverty reduction’ to be counterproductive and deliberately have chosen alternative language. In Edmonton, low-income focus group participants reported they felt awkward with the language while a communications specialist and several government and business partners believed that the phrase ‘poverty reduction’ was a ‘double negative’ and therefore difficult to use to motivate community involvement. The Edmonton group subsequently decided to employ the phrase ‘From Surviving to Thriving’ to describe its work.

Similarly, the Quality of Life Challenge in Victoria capitalizes on the fact that the area’s quality of life is a source of pride for local residents. The Quality of Life Challenge taps into a natural momentum in proposing efforts to ensure that all residents are able to share in this valued aspect of community life.

A third set of organizations has chosen not to focus their work on poverty reduction *per se*, opting instead to integrate this goal into a broader effort to revitalize many aspects of community life. In Saskatoon, for instance, this broad focus includes tackling the goal of food security, improving community safety and helping residents to achieve sustainable incomes. In Halifax, the emerging plan involves a wide range of strategies to counter racism, improve employment opportunities, increase access to information and communications technology, enhance community safety and address the needs of children and youth.

Is the primary target household level outcomes or community-level change?

Recently, a tension has emerged within Vibrant Communities over the relationship between the community capacity-building process and household-level outcomes. The issue is not a simple one. Everyone involved affirms both the importance of building community capacity to reduce poverty and tracking benefits experienced by households.

In some respects, the issue is related to the availability of time and money needed to carry out the work at multiple levels. However, the tension also arises from the focus of Vibrant Communities. Is the primary focus on bringing about systemic changes that enhance the capacity of communities to reduce poverty (e.g., building a broad network of partners committed to poverty reduction, developing a strategic plan or improving collaboration among key players)? Or is it on programs that yield direct benefits for low-income households (e.g., employment initiatives; affordable housing)?

The answer may be that both approaches are required. The challenge lies in finding how to combine these somewhat different dimensions of our work. Although it is early in their development, various Trail Builders appear to have distinct ways of understanding the interplay between community capacity-building and household-level outcomes.

In British Columbia's Capital Region, for example, the Quality of Life Challenge is using social marketing to engage the community in tackling issues, such as sustainable incomes and housing, that will achieve tangible results for low-income residents. In New Brunswick, Vibrant Communities Saint John has focused on pursuing 'strategic level interventions' such as community education, technical assistance, and systematic evaluation and reporting to strengthen the community's ability to achieve improved outcomes for low-income households. In Nova Scotia, the Halifax Inner City Initiative gradually is building community capacity and achieving household-level outcomes by improving collaboration between members of the inner city and various structures capable of supporting their efforts.

Pan-Canadian Learning

In many respects, Vibrant Communities is as much an experiment in pan-Canadian learning as in community-based poverty reduction. How do we enable communities to learn from and with one another when they are widely dispersed geographically and when they are addressing complex and demanding challenges within their own settings?

Moreover, how do national level organizations and local communities collaborate in directing such a venture? The Pan-Canadian Learning Community can be seen as an alternative structure for the joint management of initiatives involving national sponsors and local communities. It represents a community format in which power is shared widely among the various partners.

While the Pan-Canadian Learning Community has evolved considerably over 18 months, it is still very much an experiment and a work in progress. A number of lessons have been learned and some new questions raised.

Building relationships

It is well established that learning occurs best among people who have developed relationships of trust [Torjman et al. 2001: 16]. Furthermore, in order for peer learning to occur, participants must be familiar with the contexts in which their colleagues are operating.

Considerable effort has been made to help participants build the relationships required for collaborative learning. At the Pan-Canadian level, this building has taken place primarily among conveners through their participation in monthly conference calls and other teleconference events. The substantial interaction among local conveners and sponsors, as well as the participatory decision-making undertaken with respect to Learning Community activities, have created a sense of

participation in a collectively owned process. The underlying trust that has been built allows for differences to be expressed and explored, thereby enriching the learning process.

Enabling participants to become familiar with their respective contexts has been accomplished on a more limited basis. Local conveners typically share updates on developments in their initiatives at the outset of each monthly convener conference call. However, due to the number of communities involved, the brevity and generality of reports, and the widely varying stages of the initiatives, many conveners found these updates to be more tedious and time-consuming than helpful for advancing their own or each other's learning. Nonetheless, it is likely that this updating process has helped establish a certain level of familiarity among conveners about the contexts in which they work.

A strong underlying theme in the preliminary assessment of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community was a desire for more extensive opportunities for peer-to-peer learning [C.A.C. International 2003: 4]. While steps already have been taken to enable more focused discussions among smaller groups of conveners, others are needed, particularly among the communities pursuing Trail Builder initiatives. Tamarack recently has revised the Vibrant Communities website to include a web page for each community providing extensive information about its ongoing work [<http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca>]. This resource should further strengthen the understanding of each community's activities, successes and challenges.

Time for learning

Learning takes time and many people leading initiatives at the local level are already overextended. Even when the opportunities afforded by the Pan-Canadian Learning Community were seen as relevant and valuable, some local conveners found it difficult to take the time to participate fully. When Learning Community activities were less relevant and valuable for local work, it became difficult to justify allocating the required time [C.A.C. International 2003: 9].

While these time constraints clearly place an onus on Learning Community facilitators to find ways to customize learning opportunities, it also creates a challenge for local partners. In the knowledge society, there is an accelerated demand for learning. Creating learning organizations and communities requires some reorganizing of processes, resources and time. There is a need to build into job descriptions and workplans time specifically for learning.

Resource-strapped organizations and communities will always struggle to devote 'people power' to all of the valuable work that needs to be done. Funds provided through Vibrant Communities or through convener organizations have allowed some communities to allocate staff time specifically to this work. In those cases, communities are better able to take advantage of various learning opportunities.

Information overload

Given the explosion of information and its extraordinary accessibility through Information and Communication Technologies, we all face information overload. Information selection and packaging are much-needed services in themselves.

On the one hand, some participants in Vibrant Communities have been dismayed by their inability to find time to read what they perceived to be the abundance of valuable materials available through the initiative. In fact, some have expressed frustration at the *over*-abundance of information and the difficulty, at times, of sorting through this material to find what is relevant to their needs [C.A.C. International 2003: 17].

The e-bulletins prepared by Tamarack were applauded by many organizers for their brevity, frequency (every two weeks) and effective selection of relevant resources [C.A.C. International 2003: 12]. Still other mechanisms are needed to help communities isolate information and ideas relevant to their needs so they can take advantage of, rather than be swamped by, the available resources.

One option under consideration is a searchable database including brief summaries of selected resources as well as links to the actual document. Preparing such resources takes time and effort. In a world of proliferating information, there is a need for facilitating access to relevant information. If Vibrant Communities' learning process is not to bog down through overload, more attention must be paid to the way that information resources are made available to participants.

The 'wholesaling' and 'retailing' of learning

The learning needs of communities vary from one another both in content and timing. This variability creates a challenge for ensuring that learning materials and events are relevant and timely for each of the participating communities.

Adding to this challenge is the fact that there are still other audiences being addressed through the materials produced as part of the Vibrant Communities initiative. The research papers prepared for the Policy Dialogue, for example, are geared somewhat more to policy-makers than to community participants, relevant as they may be to both.

One consequence of this situation is the need to distinguish between the 'wholesaling' and 'retailing' of learning. Some events and materials are pitched in more general terms than may be relevant for individual communities. They are meant to speak to concerns and interests that cut across different local and organizational contexts.

Accepting the need for events and materials with a broad audience in mind, it is clear that it is important to customize learning support to individual communities or clusters of communities that share similar concerns.

Several measures already have been taken to tackle this issue. In part, it is addressed through coaching, whose purpose is to enable communities to apply ideas framed in more general terms to their local circumstances. Respondents to the preliminary assessment of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community gave especially high marks to the coaching support they received. It was observed to be competent, timely and, above all, tailored to the practical concerns of local organizers [C.A.C. International 2003: 15].

The need for customization also is being addressed through special conference calls that supplement monthly convener calls. While the convener calls tend to focus on topics of broad relevance, the more specialized calls allow interested communities to come together to explore specific issues. Two such calls have been conducted to date and both proved to be dynamic exchanges of ideas and information. These sessions were tightly structured and supported by short briefing papers (the recently created *What We Know So Far* series). This format has been successful in bridging the gap between ‘wholesaling’ at a broad level and ‘retailing’ at a more focused level.

Linking ‘codified’ and ‘tacit’ knowledge

The learning process involves a two-way path through which the ‘codified’ knowledge of formal research is translated into practice in communities and the informal or ‘tacit knowledge’ of practitioners is documented and made accessible to others [Torjman et al. 2001: 38].

In Vibrant Communities, this two-way translation process involves the work of a variety of knowledge mediators or brokers. Tamarack and Caledon staff, along with local conveners, all contribute to this work, serving variously as practitioner-researchers and researcher-practitioners. The process involves, on the one hand, breaking down and re-working formal research so that it can be applied to specific practical contexts and, on the other, articulating the practitioner insights and know-how so that these can be shared as formal knowledge. In some cases, this process requires several steps as a wide array of literature is reviewed and summarized for the purposes of Vibrant Communities and then re-worked by organizers who select and reshape the elements most relevant to local circumstances.

While not an entirely new area of work, such knowledge brokering has become a vital component of the Vibrant Communities learning process. Refining the ways in which this work is done and engaging the resources of other institutions, such as universities, to help carry it out warrants attention in the next phase of the initiative.

Using different media

Some media are more effective for learning than others.

Face-to-face interaction continues to be the preferred mode when possible. Reports from several Learning Community members who had the opportunity to make even brief visits to colleagues in other communities consistently indicated that these trips provided satisfying learning experiences. Face-to-face visits undoubtedly allow for a more extensive sensory experience than most electronic media permit. Even a simple meeting in the offices of colleagues conveys information about the organization and the community in which it operates. One wonders what difference video conferencing might make to our long-distance efforts at collaborative learning.

Both the Vibrant Communities website and the e-mail bulletins were identified by local participants as useful tools. The website was seen as an excellent repository of information and a valuable resource about Vibrant Communities. The e-mail bulletins were found to be helpful sources of news about developments in the initiative and for resources on various aspects of comprehensive, multisectoral poverty reduction [C.A.C. International 2003: 10-12].

Efforts to stimulate use of the electronic bulletin board have been less successful. It is not clear if the bulletin board offers any particular advantages over other media such as telephone or e-mail exchanges. If anything, it appears to be even less “personal,” “direct” and “intimate” – words used to describe positive learning situations – than these other communication tools.

Organizing local initiatives

Vibrant Communities was always conceived as an ‘action learning’ process. As Trail Builder initiatives evolve and move into full operation, their experiences will enrich the discussions within the Learning Community. The practical challenges of pursuing such initiatives in communities already have provided a focal point for elaborating the approaches we have taken to this work and for wrestling with the questions that they raise.

The development process

The development phase of comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives is more than a preliminary event en route to implementation. It is integral to the work itself.

Mobilizing partners, articulating a framework for the work they will do together, and exploring the roles and contributions they can make comprise the substance of the community-based poverty reduction process. While these elements may be especially pronounced in the early stages of a local initiative, they are recurring concerns in the process of bringing about systemic changes to reduce poverty.

In this respect, Vibrant Communities is inherently an ‘iterative’ process. What this means is that we continually revisit a certain complex set of challenges as we try to bring about changes that approximate ever more closely the results we are seeking. The way in which diverse partners link their efforts to reduce poverty lies at the core of our work.

Community size

At various points during the first 18 months of Vibrant Communities, the question was raised as to whether the size of community has an impact on the opportunities or challenges local initiatives face. It is not yet clear what differences may exist between efforts at comprehensive, multisectoral poverty reduction in communities of different scale. However, in some respects, the differences may not be great.

It is possible that the smaller urban neighbourhoods participating in Vibrant Communities need to build relations with a variety of organizations and institutions in the wider environment, and with still other organizations and institutions beyond the city altogether. Similarly, city-wide initiatives may well come to concentrate some of their energy on particular neighbourhoods in which poverty is pronounced. In either case, a web of relationships is needed that connects smaller communities with much wider networks of individuals and organizations. These patterns are already evident in initiatives taking place in core neighbourhoods of Halifax and Saskatoon where gaining appropriate kinds of support from agencies external to the community is a critical part of the process.

On the other hand, the differences in starting points should not be discounted. An initiative that is rooted primarily in a specific neighbourhood likely will draw on assets, such as strong resident identification with the community, and encounter obstacles, such as entrenched antagonisms among local factions, that may be less evident or less problematic in the diffuse context of a city-wide initiative.

The role of convener

One of the distinctive features of Vibrant Communities' work is its focus on the convener role. Multisectoral networks committed to poverty reduction and supported by local conveners can represent a significant addition to the social infrastructure of the community.

As the Tamarack primer on *Convening a Comprehensive, Multisectoral Effort to Reduce Poverty* suggests, the convener role is neither obvious nor simple. Tamarack has begun to chart the functions that local conveners can serve including: networking and brokering, social marketing, coaching and technical assistance, funding, advocacy and administration of special projects [Cabaj, Kearney and Reid 2002].

Adopting the convener role often appears to require both a shift in the culture of the organization and the gradual building of new skills and capacities. While funders increasingly have supported the role of local convener in recent years, many organizations are still adding this function to their other areas of work.

Developing the convener role raises some delicate challenges for local organizations as they seek to distinguish their established line of work from their efforts to animate, facilitate and support the work of others in the community. When convener organizations are engaged in delivering various projects and programs, the possibility of competition with organizations seeking to work in the same areas can complicate the convening process. In addition, convening such initiatives requires a significant amount of time and energy [Cornerstone Consulting Group 2002]. Organizations assuming this role need to be prepared for the demands that it entails.

Engaging the sectors

While the process of engagement varies by each community, there are a number of common themes.

Perhaps not surprisingly, local conveners often seem to get the most quick and favourable response from nonprofit organizations that work with marginalized residents. For some, it seems that a group of leaders has acknowledged that poverty is an issue and wants to lend their moral support; for others, the possibility that participation in the collaboration may help bring about greater results is enough to get them involved.

The success of groups in engaging government agencies is also quite strong. Local and regional governments have played instrumental roles in Saskatoon, Edmonton, Waterloo and Niagara by providing leadership and, in some cases, funding. They have been involved as well in Saint John, St. Michel and Regent Park, working on key committees or sponsorship groups.

The participation of federal and provincial government departments is more sporadic. With a few exceptions, the role of the federal and provincial governments has been limited to funding specific initiatives more than collaborating in the overall development of community-based poverty reduction. The Nova Scotia government has been actively involved, for example, in fostering the Halifax Inner City Initiative. In Halifax, Victoria and other communities, positive working relationships have been evolving with specific federal departments.

While serving a somewhat different purpose, the Policy Dialogue process offers the opportunity to establish links between various levels of government and specific communities. The aim of the Policy Dialogue is to enhance the understanding of how governments and communities can collaborate in undertaking comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction, and to establish the groundwork on which a policy framework can be built in this area.

As a result of the networking and relationship-building taking place through the Policy Dialogue, opportunities are emerging for government/community collaboration. One example is the Gender Analysis for Community-Based Poverty Reduction initiative in which six communities are participating. With funding from Status of Women Canada, this project is enabling communities to enhance their capacity to address the gender dimensions of poverty.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many groups have reported that they find it more difficult to approach business – whether small companies or large corporations – to get involved in the work. Businesses typically are more concerned with profit, and leave the responsibility for assisting low-income residents to government agencies and nonprofit organizations. To some extent, the challenge encountered by local initiatives has not been the refusal of business to support the work of poverty reduction but the uncertainty of how to begin that conversation. The tele-learning forum on engaging business, supplemented by a series of tele-classes on the same topic, has helped provide language, concepts and practical examples for bridging this gap.

There are, of course, some remarkable exceptions to the limited engagement of business. Opportunities 2000 in Waterloo Region has had strong business community involvement since that initiative's inception. In Saint John, more than 60 businesses are involved in the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), which has served as the local convener for Vibrant Communities Saint John. In both Victoria and Surrey, Coast Capital Savings Credit Union plays a leadership role through its direct support to these initiatives and by serving as a bridge for reaching other members of the business community.

Local poverty reduction initiatives also have found support from the credit union sector with credit unions in Saskatoon and Niagara aligning themselves with their respective local efforts. A commitment to multiple bottom lines – economic, social and environmental – is not only evident in the credit union movement. Other socially responsible corporations have played an integral role in local initiatives, Canadian Tire Financial Services in Niagara being one case in point.

While many organizations report feeling uncertain about how best to engage the business sector, nearly all have reported that they are not clear about the most effective ways to involve low-income residents. Resident organizing is one community development activity that frequently goes unfunded. As a result, many community organizations have only limited experience and capacity in this area.

While most, if not all, communities have low-income representation in local organizing groups, engaging a larger number of low-income residents in guiding the initiatives is more problematic. The Quality of Life Challenge in Victoria has decided to establish a reference group of low-income residents who will meet periodically to review various facets of the work undertaken by the Challenge. Others anticipate identifying a range of opportunities for low-income residents to contribute to the process, possibly including participation in periodic consultations, direct involvement in undertaking specific projects or serving in staff positions.

Some low-income participants in Vibrant Communities have called for the creation of a forum at the Pan-Canadian level where they can meet to share ideas, provide mutual support and identify ways that their views can be heard more clearly within both the Pan-Canadian and local initiatives. This group has pointed out the limited opportunities that low-income residents have had to serve on panels or make presentations at events such as the Face-to-Face Forum. It also noted the importance of the firsthand experience of poverty that low-income participants bring to this work, including the emotional aspects of living in poverty.

The Tamarack Institute has completed several research projects on ‘engagement’ and ‘low-income resident engagement.’ Using the combined results of these research efforts, it has prepared a framework and tool that can be used by local initiatives to improve their ability to provide meaningful opportunities for low-income residents.

Approaches to being comprehensive

The idea of comprehensive thinking and action is compelling but putting it into practice poses challenges. Tamarack has identified four approaches that communities pursuing comprehensive initiatives tend to employ:

1. *Comprehensive from the outset* – In this approach, communities seek to develop wide-ranging plans and implement all facets of them simultaneously from the very beginning of their work.
2. *Identification of strategic drivers* – Communities determine a small number of critical issues that need to be addressed to lever broader changes and outcomes – e.g., a particular issue, such as education, or a specific population group, such as youth. From this initial focus, related concerns gradually are addressed and a comprehensive strategy built.
3. *Response to emerging opportunities* – Communities may initiate their work on an issue that has captured community attention, such as a rise in homelessness, and carefully build their initiatives around that issue. They may take advantage of other such opportunities as these emerge and try to connect these initiatives to one another as they carry on their work.
4. *Building around both strategic drivers and emerging opportunities* – Communities may combine these approaches, seeking to balance their efforts at strategic planning with an ability to respond to the evolving reality of community life.

It is now widely recognized in the field that attempting to be comprehensive from the outset is an extremely difficult, if not impossible, task. The reigning philosophy is to think comprehensively but act strategically in relation to the realities and circumstances of the community.

Indeed, this is the approach that participating communities are taking. Victoria, for instance, has identified three areas upon which it will focus its activities: Sustainable Incomes, Affordable Housing and Community Connections. Niagara is pursuing a combined approach responding to some immediate opportunities while also focusing on areas of strategic intervention. Saskatoon is setting priorities within a truly comprehensive 20-year plan developed by its Core Neighbourhood Development Council. Issues such as food security, community safety and employment are emerging as immediate priorities. Similar approaches are being taken by other Trail Builders.

In a certain respect, the term ‘comprehensive’ may be misleading. It tends to emphasize the range and scope of the issues to be addressed. An alternative dimension to consider is the way in which the various issues, and the responses to them, relate to one another. The key word here is ‘integration.’ Too often people living in poverty fall through the cracks in programs and services that operate in isolation from one another. Likewise, communities may lack well-developed stepping-stones that enable individuals to address a series of challenges over a period of time without falling back into difficulties because the next stone in the path is missing. Re-emphasizing integration may be necessary if we are to develop flexible and responsive systems to ensure that people are able to make progress in what is often a long and winding journey out of poverty.

Working across levels and sectors

Too often, the expectation both within and outside communities is that somehow community-based initiatives can solve complex challenges entirely through their own resources. Communities recognize the value of connecting with other regions engaged in similar work and with an array of external agencies that can provide support of various kinds – e.g., funders, technical assistance intermediaries, research institutes and policy-makers.

When asked about the value of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community, organizers affirmed its significance in offering much-needed moral support, adding credibility to their local poverty reduction efforts, creating opportunities to learn from and with other communities engaged in similar work, assisting with fundraising, providing valuable coaching assistance, enabling access to relevant research and opening a dialogue between community leaders and policy-makers.

The effort to collaborate in pursuit of poverty reduction takes place both across various levels of activity and across sectors. Based on the US experience, the Aspen Institute has described a four-level ‘ecology’ that is needed to support these initiatives. Included in the ecology are local residents, ground-level organizations, national intermediaries (such as technical assistance providers) and groups that advocate for broader system and policy change [Kubisch et al. 2002: 4-5]. This same pattern appears to apply well to the work of Vibrant Communities. Aligning the contributions from all of these sources remains the primary challenge of the initiative.

Fundraising

Trail Builder communities face considerable challenges in raising the funds required to support their initiatives. Over the course of the last year, interested communities participated in a series of capacity-building conference calls to strengthen their know-how with respect to fundraising. Led by DVA Navion, a fundraising consulting firm, these sessions have focused on approaches appropriate to financing the kind of transformative ventures that Vibrant Communities represents.

Through this process, communities have gained a much more thorough understanding of what it means to be a fundraising organization and what it takes to mount a systematic campaign. One particularly important facet of this approach has been the emphasis on fundraising as a community engagement strategy. The effort is not so much to raise funds as to raise friends who share a commitment to the cause and are prepared to contribute in a variety of ways, including financially.

Ensuring inclusion

The experience of poverty is different for people from diverse backgrounds and circumstances. Recently, Vibrant Communities has begun to explore how various social relationships can have an impact on the experience of poverty. Through the Gender and Poverty Project, six communities have begun to consider how the relations between women and men affect their respective experiences of poverty. A day-long popular education workshop enabled men and women in each community to develop a richer understanding of the gender dimensions of poverty and to consider how these issues could be addressed. The project represents the first steps in an effort to integrate an awareness of gender issues in the work of Vibrant Communities.

Naturally, there are other important social relationships that shape the experience of poverty. Race and disability are two other factors which have begun to receive some attention within Vibrant Communities. However, further work is needed to ensure that our efforts recognize and address the full range of dynamics that contribute to poverty.

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