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# **Engaging Disenfranchised Groups in Urban Health**

*by*

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## *Focus on Poverty*

I would like to thank the organizers for the invitation to participate in this conference. I will be exploring the issue of urban health and disenfranchised groups from the perspective of a 15-city national project, called Vibrant Communities.\*

These 15 centres are collaborating in a national learning partnership. Their goal is to work, both individually and collectively, to develop local solutions to reduce poverty and thereby improve the quality of life in those urban centres.

Poverty is a stubborn problem in our country as it is in other industrialized nations. The overall poverty rate stood at 9.5 percent (2,908,000 Canadians) at last count in 2002. While this figure represents the national average, certain groups such as Aboriginal Canadians living both on reserve and in urban centres experience disproportionately higher rates of poverty. As a result, they suffer greater consequences, particularly with respect to poor health.

We know through both research and experience that poverty imposes heavy social, economic and personal costs that affect all Canadians, both directly and indirectly. It means lost opportunities for individuals and society, and higher risks of a wide range of health and educational problems. Poverty means heavier social expenditures and foregone revenues that governments require to fund important public programs – especially those aimed at preventing and reducing poverty.

In Canada, at least those who are poor have access to health care services through our publicly funded health care system. But while it provides treatment to those who are sick, it does little to prevent illness – other than to deliver basics, such as immunization and early screening.

The Vibrant Communities project, by contrast, is rooted in a determinants-of-health approach. It focuses not upon access to health care services but rather upon the major contextual factors that influence health. These determinants include, for example, level and source of income, the quality and affordability of housing, the density of social networks and the ability to participate meaningfully in the community.

Our assumption with respect to the latter determinants is rooted in the extensive research on social capital conducted largely in the US. The creation of meaningful opportunities for participation can have a significant impact upon personal health and well-being by linking individuals with networks of support that provide practical assistance and contact with training and employment opportunities. These social relations have a powerful protective effect on health.

\* *The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is the primary funder of this project.*

Our project seeks to improve health by reducing poverty. The participating communities have chosen different interventions in their efforts to achieve this goal. These include increasing the supply of affordable housing, helping low-income households build assets, providing opportunities for self-sufficiency through employment training and small business development, and building networks of social support.

Still others are working to ensure that teen mothers can complete their high school education to help break the long-term cycle of poverty. This is actually a key health-related strategy. A recent analysis of a longitudinal survey on children and youth found that the most significant predictor of healthy child outcomes was not household income, which ranked third out of five factors, but rather the educational level of the mother.

Clearly, the Vibrant Communities project is not unique in its focus. Literally thousands of projects throughout the world seek to reduce poverty and promote inclusion. In that sense, our project is like many others. But what makes this project substantially different is the *architecture* or key building blocks that comprise its structure. We believe that this unique methodology contributes significantly to the quality and scale of our work.

So what makes this project different? Fifteen cities across the country, including two in Québec that operate in French, are joined together in a national learning partnership. As noted, each centre is responsible for developing its own unique approach to reducing poverty. Each seeks to improve the quality of life for low-income community members by engaging them actively in three major components of the project: its governance, its learning processes and its policy work. I would like to discuss briefly these three dimensions.

## ***Governance***

The poverty reduction strategy in each of the 15 cities varies widely throughout the country. But they have an important feature in common. They are all governed by a local body or coordinating mechanism. In order to participate in this project, each centre must involve representatives from at least four key sectors: business, government, the voluntary sector and people living in poverty. They are assisted in this process by our national partner, the Tamarack Institute, which is responsible for the community development process associated with the project.

The local governance body plans, implements and evaluates all aspects of the poverty reduction strategy. Their work is guided by the principle of inclusion. People living in poverty are not seen simply as targets or subjects of the various interventions. Rather, they are active agents in the creation and application of these interventions.

Their involvement helps ensure the relevance of the work. But this active engagement is also important from an individual perspective. We know from both literature and practice that control over life circumstances is a major determinant of health.

The fact that the project ties communities together is also empowering. Participants across the country have told us that the national connection gives them a voice beyond their own community.

But it is important to acknowledge that this engagement is easier said than done. For one thing, it is impossible for any group – let alone a local project with modest funding – to be entirely ‘representative’ of the community. All that we can do is try to move forward continually toward greater inclusion and question ourselves continually as to how well we are doing in this regard.

Each urban centre needs to have a clear understanding of the marginalized groups in their respective region. Some of the participating communities actually develop a formal poverty profile in order to identify more precisely their marginalized members. In some cases, it is specific groups such as new Canadians, persons with disabilities or Aboriginal Canadians living off reserve. In other cases, entire neighbourhoods have been designated as high risk or high need.

The second challenge that we face with respect to inclusion is less philosophical and far more practical. It pertains to the fact that many low-income individuals have not participated in these kinds of comprehensive, multisectoral strategies. We are told that these processes can be intimidating – or at least not welcoming. Sometimes meetings are convened in venues, like boardrooms or City Council chambers, which are unfamiliar to many in the community. The formal procedures of such meetings as well as the style of discussion also may be foreign and may create a barrier to participation.

There are other practical issues. Meetings may be held in the evening to accommodate the employed members of the local governance body. The result is that members must pay for child care to enable their participation outside of school hours. Transportation is another practical problem not only with respect to cost. Many women feel vulnerable travelling alone in the evening.

We are making a conscious effort to improve our inclusion efforts. In fact, the low-income members of the 15 projects across the country have talked about forming a pan-Canadian group in which they have an opportunity to communicate with each other by teleconference on an ongoing basis and occasionally in person. They want to work together to ensure that the project both respects and promotes the principle of inclusion.

Here is what we have learned so far. It is important to hold meetings in places like community centres and schools where all community members feel welcome and comfortable. It is also helpful to make available practical assistance like child care subsidies or actual child care services to ensure that parents can participate. Ideally, meetings are combined with a nutritious meal for all participants – and for their children if child care is provided on site.

We also have recognized that low-income residents are critical participants in the learning process and must be acknowledged. In a recent research project on the gender dimensions of poverty, special measures were built into the project budget to promote the participation of people living in poverty. Child care and transportation subsidies were provided to low-income residents who took part in day-long workshops held in six participating communities. In addition, low-income members of local and national working groups were paid a stipend as compensation for their time and contribution.

In addition, some communities have discovered that it is helpful to create special groups of low-income residents who can serve as a sounding board for local initiatives. These groups can provide feedback on priority issues, how the initiative presents the poor in its public communication and the most helpful ways to undertake various strategies.

We have learned that there is no one ‘right way’ for low-income individuals to participate in such initiatives. There are a variety of options: contributing to the governing body or its working groups, acting as staff person on a specific project (e.g., community outreach) or participating in focus groups or public meetings.

In my view, we have not yet made significant progress around the inclusion of certain groups, such as persons with disabilities – most of whom are poor. We need to apply more consciously the principle of accommodation in order to make real our commitment to inclusion.

We also must make a conscious and deliberate effort to engage new Canadians. This type of accommodation may entail the provision of special language interpretation. But it also involves deep cultural sensitivity toward certain groups and their understanding of poverty. It may not be culturally appropriate to apply specific interventions in some communities, and that is precisely the value of engaging these groups in the definition of the problem and the design of relevant solutions.

While we have a long way to go, at least we are consciously challenging ourselves in this area. The poverty ‘umbrella’ includes a lot of vulnerable citizens and we are trying to be as sensitive as possible to their diverse needs.

## *Learning*

A second major dimension of the project involves its active focus upon learning through many different processes. Community representatives from across the country meet on an annual basis at an inspirational national gathering. This meeting helps create a strong bond among participants who are dispersed widely across the country. But it is also an opportunity for active learning with structured workshops in areas of common interest, such as evaluation.

Representatives from each participating centre also meet on a monthly basis by teleconference to share information about the progress of their work. The participants recently proposed that they all be required to sign a letter in which they commit themselves to sharing more broadly the learning from this experience. In exchange for this commitment, each community will receive \$5,000 to engage community partners in various learning activities.

In addition to the monthly teleconferences, several tele-learning fora have been organized in which each of the 15 communities invites about 20 people to the table. The communities are joined together on a teleconference with several hundred people on the line at the same time.

A resource person is invited to present for about 20 minutes on a subject of common interest, such as income security programs for people living in poverty or fundraising for local voluntary organizations. Participants have an opportunity to pose questions. They then go off the line and continue to meet at their respective tables to discuss the application of what they have heard.

This application component is a crucial dimension of learning but it is often overlooked in many community projects. The literature on learning, much of it from the OECD, talks about a critical application component. Learning does not result simply from the passive distribution of published material, speaking presentations or e-mail bulletins. Learning is the result of an active, mediated process that translates information into meaningful application to unique local circumstances.

We have learned that it is essential to build opportunities into community processes to enable groups to reflect on new information. They need time and structured opportunities to consider its implications for the individuals and organizations engaged in the project and for the community as a whole.

Coaching is a third dimension of the learning process. Coaches are sent into selected communities to help them acquire specific skills related to poverty reduction as well as the implementation of complex projects. These skills include strategic planning, fundraising and evaluation.



But the most continual source of learning comes through web-based materials on a wide range of community interventions. The problem is that many people living in poverty do not have access to computer hardware and software, let alone to the skills required to take advantage of all this information. We recognize this problem as an area to be addressed.

## ***Policy***

A policy focus is the third major building block within the Vibrant Communities architecture. As the policy partner in this national effort, the Caledon Institute has produced over the past two years at least 10 reports related to this work, sometimes known as ‘comprehensive community initiatives.’ These initiatives are long-term, multisectoral strategies that seek to understand and intervene in the wide range of complex factors that contribute to poverty.

The reports are widely distributed to policy makers and communities. In fact, a case study of the project is being used as teaching material for the Canada School of Government. Public servants are now being trained with Vibrant Communities as the model for learning about the management of complex, ‘horizontal’ files.

But there are other important components to the policy focus. As a national policy institute, we work continually on policies related to education, employment and incomes that seek to reduce the overall burden of disadvantage by tackling structural sources of inequality. Appropriate income support, adequate minimum wages, and educational and employment policies can help reduce social exclusion.

In seeking the local application of this work, several participating communities have been involved in ‘living wage’ initiatives. The message to governments is to ensure adequate levels of minimum wage, indexed to inflation. With respect to employers, these groups are trying to convince private business about the importance of paying a decent wage. Households should not be better off on welfare than they are working.

In addition to promoting policy ‘enablers’ or policies that build self-sufficiency, we also try to identify and reduce policy barriers rooted in federal or provincial programs or practices. These were described in a report we wrote entitled *Dumb and Dumber Government Rules*.

The purpose of that report was to link the problems of individuals to broader public policies – basically to turn private troubles into public issues. In fact, this work represents an important way to scale up the efforts of the project.

Scaling up with respect to projects is often described from a quantitative perspective – e.g., going from 15 projects to 100. But I am talking here about a qualitatively different form of scaling up that clearly has an associated quantitative impact. The implementation of a policy enabler or the removal of a policy barrier can affect thousands of households.

One example involves local efforts to help low-income households build assets through savings to be used for education or employment. Several of the Vibrant Communities initiatives are working to create ‘individual development accounts.’

These accounts follow a similar template: A group of low-income households is selected to participate in the project. They are required to save a set amount – say \$1 a week. For many households, even this nominal amount is not easy because it means giving up something else, like a bus ride home.

Each dollar deposited in a designated account is then matched by the project on a set ratio. Typically, \$3 are paid for every dollar saved (though the ratio could be as high as \$5 to \$1 or even \$9 to \$1 as found in some American projects).

We know from much of the work that John McKnight has done in the US as well as research coming out of the UK that assets have an important impact upon well-being. Assets effectively act as a personal safety net that provides a buffer against uncertainty. The fact that households have choice in their lives – made possible by the ability to pay for courses, move to a new neighbourhood or choose other life options – affords a degree of empowerment and hope whose importance cannot be underestimated in terms of tackling poverty.

The private sector, in particular, likes this model because of the practical and clear results the investment generally produces. While these assets will not directly reduce the number living on low incomes, they are believed to provide an important route on the pathway out of poverty and a significant skill with respect to self-sufficiency.

The Government of Canada became so interested in the model of asset-based policy that it created its own national demonstration to test its efficacy. In fact, it went so far as to introduce in the last federal Budget a learning bond for low-income families. The government helps match the private savings of low-income households in respect of postsecondary education for their children.

The problem is that as soon as households begin to accumulate assets, they come right up against provincial welfare policy. More specifically, the so-called ‘liquid asset exemption guidelines’ prohibit these families from having assets that exceed certain minimal levels. A household basically must be bone poor to qualify for welfare and must remain that way to stay eligible.

It is very difficult to help people begin the journey out of social assistance because they tend to get blocked at key points. We are working on documenting that major policy barrier to independence.

A recent government announcement offered a small glimmer of hope. The Ontario Minister of Social Services announced just last week that she intends to scrap one of the “dumb” welfare rules (her word) that make it difficult for welfare recipients to save for their children’s education. Maybe the message is starting slowly to get through to policy makers. But there is still more work to do.

Welfare recipients who begin to earn a minimal amount from training or part-time work quickly come up against the ‘earnings exemptions guidelines’ of social assistance policy that effectively reduce welfare payments by one dollar for every dollar earned through employment. If these individuals try to succeed, they can end up losing their income, thereby risking the health and well-being of the entire household.

A third barrier arises from the fact that social assistance pays for special health- or disability-related needs. Recipients who move off welfare lose access to that essential assistance, which can be worth hundreds or even thousands of dollars a year depending upon household circumstances. Few individuals find employers who are willing to pay that amount – and the jobs that many workers are able to find have no associated health plan.

We are trying to engage low-income people in policy work in several ways. First, we are looking for stories of individuals who have experienced problems or barriers related to government policies and programs, particularly with respect to income security.

Second, we have set up several learning opportunities that allow a more in-depth exploration of certain areas. These include, for example, the needs of new Canadians or eligibility for income security programs including pensions, child benefits and disability payments.

Part of our task involves the provision of information about various programs. We find that many people are not even aware that they may be eligible for these programs. We try to explain the difference between measures like Old Age Security, the Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors and the Canada Pension Plan.

There recently was a class action in which thousands of seniors claimed that the federal government had not informed them of their eligibility, as low-income individuals, for a monthly supplement to their basic elderly benefit. The claimants won and the government had to pay millions of dollars retroactively.

One of our partners in Vibrant Communities subsequently mounted a community effort to inform seniors about this program. Through its efforts, 636 seniors were able to access a total of \$2.6 million from the Guaranteed Income Supplement program.

The third dimension of our policy work involves a policy dialogue, which the Caledon Institute hosted over an 18-month period. We invited representatives from 10 federal departments, including health, human resources, the Urban Aboriginal Strategy, justice, citizenship and immigration, housing and heritage (responsible for issues related to the voluntary sector) to meet once a month over lunch, which we provided. It was catered by a group of former psychiatric patients who had set up their own small business called “Krackers Katering.”

While the government representatives met in person, we hooked up phone lines across the country so that the 15 communities could participate as they wished. Communities were informed of the topic in advance and then made a decision as to whether they would have a member on the line. Occasionally, representatives from several provincial governments joined these discussions as well.

Each session had a specific agenda that was of interest both to governments and the communities. Evaluation is a case in point; community data for evidence-based decision-making was another topic we considered.

We alternated between government and community presentations. On several occasions, we focused on local efforts to enhance the participation of low-income residents in the policy development process. One group from Saskatoon described both the 20-year plan they had developed to reduce poverty and their efforts to strengthen the voice of low-income residents in provincial welfare policy. In another case, representatives from the Inner City Halifax project, most of whom are black, talked about issues related to racism and discrimination.

We also discussed the barriers that government requirements create from an administrative perspective. Each government department has its own application and evaluation procedures, which can result in a significant paper burden for local groups.

Several communities subsequently have decided to initiate their own policy dialogue sessions. The United Way in Calgary, Alberta, for example, is spearheading a public policy roundtable that brings together persons with disabilities and representatives from a number of community agencies. These individuals were asked to identify the problems they face with respect to an income security program (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped) run by the province.

It would have been very easy to pack the stairs of the legislature with people in wheelchairs and to create a great ‘photo op’ for the media. But the community felt that this was not the best way to initiate the process. There may be a need for a public demonstration at some point. And in a democracy, citizens always have the right to express their concerns in this way. But they felt that starting with a dialogue at least might open the door to an ongoing working relationship with the province.

It is of interest that members from the Edmonton group of Vibrant Communities have begun to participate in this work because the focus is a provincial program that equally affects both cities. So the individual projects are starting to make links around their policy concerns in a way that they never have done before.

At the same time, there is an ongoing effort to continue to expand our collective understanding of inclusion issues. A year-long Gender and Poverty Project was undertaken to raise the profile of the gender dimensions of poverty. A review of the various tools developed by Vibrant Communities helped ensure that they appropriately recognize gender as one of the vital factors shaping the experience of poverty. This work has increased our appreciation of other similar factors, including disability and race, which have a significant impact upon the experience of poverty.

## ***Conclusion***

In summary, Vibrant Communities seeks to engage disenfranchised groups in at least three dimensions of its work: project governance, various learning processes and policy change. We have learned a lot from this work – primarily the fact that there is still so much more that we need to learn. We certainly do not have all the answers. But at least we are trying to ask the right questions.

Why is this work important to urban health? Healthy communities seek ways to reduce exclusion, which all too often is linked to poverty, ill health, drug use and crime. Healthy communities seek to meaningfully engage their citizens. Excluded groups themselves must be involved in determining precisely what those meaningful opportunities might be.

We are trying through this project to find ways not to *work on* people. Rather, we want to *work with* them to enhance not only their own health but that of the larger community. Our assumption is that mobilizing urban communities to improve the health and well-being of disenfranchised groups also contributes substantially to the health and well-being of all.

Thank you.