



# **Orienteering Over New Ground: A Neighbourhood Theory of Change**

*by*

**Cheryl Gorman**

**June 2006**



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## ***Summary***

The Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) policy dialogue group concluded that strengthening neighbourhoods feels much like orienteering, defined by the Miriam Online Dictionary as “a cross-country race in which each participant uses a map and compass to navigate between checkpoints along an unfamiliar course.” *Orienteering Over New Ground: A Neighbourhood Theory of Change* is the story of our own orienteering expedition – action learning on the interrelationships and role of transformational change among neighbourhoods, bridge builders and associated systems of support.

Using experience and research, the group concluded that strengthening neighbourhoods is important because:

- Poverty is becoming more concentrated in specific neighbourhoods.
- These same neighbourhoods have high concentrations of other risk factors.
- Neighbourhoods develop “tipping points.”
- Once a tipping point is reached, more negative outcomes are concentrated in poor neighbourhoods.
- Individual quality of life is negatively affected by living in a poor neighbourhood.
- Society as a whole also suffers through loss of economic productivity and higher taxes.
- Investing directly in neighbourhoods can have a positive impact upon the economic and social health of the neighbourhood.

This knowledge motivated us to find a new way of working intentionally together on a complex issue. Our comprehensive community approach maintains that the well-being of residents and neighbourhoods will be strengthened when they gain sufficient social, cultural, physical, environmental and economic assets. This requires collaborative neighbourhood governance that is resident-led in combination with comprehensive, system-wide support. This support is provided through organizations, which must be internally and collectively strong and healthy to fulfill their bridging and “systems of support” roles. For this to happen, transformational change is necessary in terms of processes, mindsets, time and resources (champions, financial investment, technical assistance, research data and policy changes).

If we succeed in achieving this change, all residents will have the opportunity to participate in and lead community life – building strong neighbourhoods that are vital to economic prosperity and quality of life for all.

In the short- to medium-term, positive impact can be demonstrated in the area of community development planning, neighbourhood engagement and governance, mission and action plans, and links with the systems of support. By constantly being in testing mode, partners can determine when course corrections are needed.

## *In the beginning*

In February 2005, a new national learning initiative called Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) was launched. Its purpose is to explore and assess approaches to strengthening neighbourhoods that are resident-led and can enhance the capacity of individuals and families to build and sustain strong, healthy communities.

ANC policy dialogue participants – site leaders, national project members and government sponsors – wanted to capture our early learning about this work and compare it with international research. Participants developed this working tool to assist with future strengthening neighbourhood initiatives.

Storytelling is a wonderful means of developing a common language. The policy dialogue group concluded that strengthening neighbourhoods feels much like orienteering. This work is exploratory and often feels like a race against time as the neighbourhood landscape, or map, constantly changes. We do have a compass – beliefs that have proven true in earlier work. It is important to stop regularly and check progress against our final destination – strong neighbourhoods and healthy communities. With constant change, it is easy to go off course. *Orienteering Over New Ground: A Neighbourhood Theory of Change* is our story.

## *Context*

ANC is a pan-Canadian project that involves four national and five local partners in an effort to revitalize and improve the quality of life in five selected neighbourhoods across the country. The four national partners are United Way of Canada-Centraide Canada, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the National Film Board of Canada and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. The five local partners are the United Ways in Halifax, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Regina and Surrey. These local partners bring together neighbourhood residents and individuals who reflect the views of diverse sectors including voluntary organizations, business and governments.

Action for Neighbourhood Change also involves as partners its five government sponsors: the National Secretariat on Homelessness (Human Resources and Social Development), Office for Learning Technologies (Human Resources and Social Development), National Literacy Secretariat (Human Resources and Social Development), Canada's Drug Strategy (Health Canada) and National Crime Prevention Strategy (Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada). The ANC policy dialogue also includes participants from Statistics Canada, Social Development Canada and the Cities and Communities Secretariat.<sup>1</sup>

This policy tool begins with a short summary about why strong neighbourhoods matter. Definitions of commonly used terms and assumptions about this work are then provided. After

reviewing some themes in research methodology, a theory of change is presented, including a description of what can be expected in the early stages of strengthening neighbourhoods. ANC work to develop a preliminary Neighbourhood Well-Being Index and logic model is then presented. This policy tool is designed to reflect upon and contribute to action research. As such, it concludes with ideas to refine this tool with future experience in Canadian neighbourhood projects.

*Orienteering Over New Ground: A Neighbourhood Theory of Change* is one of two companion tools developed by the ANC policy dialogue and is intended to blend the unique learning of this project with other Canadian and international experiences. The companion tool focuses on community capacity building.

### ***Why does strengthening neighbourhoods matter?***

*Poverty is becoming more concentrated in specific neighbourhoods.* Canadian and international studies document this growing trend. For example, the income gap between richer and poorer neighbourhoods rose from 1980 to 2000 in most Canadian cities, especially from 1990 to 2000. This pattern resulted from income in richer neighbourhoods rising faster than income in poorer ones as well as an overall income decline in some neighbourhoods [Heisz and McLeod 2004: 40]. In addition, the concentration of low-income persons in low-income neighbourhoods rose [Heisz and McLeod 2004: 49].

“(R)ecent immigrants, Aboriginal people and lone parents were disproportionately represented in low-income neighbourhoods. In 2000, 19.8 percent of residents in low-income neighbourhoods were recent immigrants and 4.2 percent were Aboriginal persons. This contrasts to shares of 9.0 percent and 1.6 percent, respectively, in the CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) population overall” [Heisz and McLeod 2004: 64].

Similar patterns have been found in the United Kingdom [Lupton and Power 2004; Maclennan 2006] and the United States [Berube and Katz 2005].

*These same neighbourhoods have high concentrations of other risk factors.* High proportions of single-parent families, low levels of full-time school attendance, high levels of dependence on government transfer payments and increased incidence of chronic, environmental and mental illness are also found. In combination, these risk factors are known to reduce social capital which in turn has been shown to decrease individuals’ and communities’ ability to access needed information, resources and supports [Infrastructure Canada 2005].

*Neighbourhoods develop ‘tipping points.’* No one factor consistently triggers neighbourhood decline. A set of circumstances, specific to a particular city, is the source of decline [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation 2001]. Research points to combinations of factors such as structural shifts in the economy; increasing poverty, racial and gender discrimination; inadequate

social capital; insufficient housing; rising crime rates; impacts of migration (in and out); adverse consequences from public policy; and lack of external investment into the neighbourhood [Social Exclusion Unit 2000: 23-25; Lupton and Power 2004: 19].

*Once a ‘tipping point’ is reached, more negative outcomes are concentrated in poor neighbourhoods.* Private sector investment and local job opportunities are reduced. As business competition is reduced, residents begin paying more for basic goods and services. For example, grocery store closures result in residents buying the bulk of their food at local convenience stores at more expense [Berube and Katz 2005: 5-7; Galster 2005]. Downward pressure is exerted on local schools. As an example, high rates of student mobility and student hunger add roles for school personnel that go far beyond educational instruction and demand resources that exceed school capacity. There is some evidence to suggest that higher crime rates are more concentrated in poor neighbourhoods because the “social penalties may lower, and reduced access to jobs and quality schools may lower opportunity costs of crime” [Berube and Katz 2005: 5-7].

*Consequences of living in a poor neighbourhood – individual quality of life is negatively affected.* Negative peer influences and lack of positive role models are a significant loss for children and youth. Poorer health, lower educational achievement and shorter life expectancy are all associated with living in a poor neighbourhood [UWGT and CCSD 2004: 6-7].

*Society as a whole also suffers.* UK Chancellor Gordon Brown effectively argued for investment in neighbourhoods on economic grounds. He summarized this position by saying: “In a modern economy where skills are essential to production, denying opportunity is an unacceptable inefficiency that holds back a nation’s prosperity” [MacLennan 2006: 19], a view shared by several Canadian researchers [Bradford 2004; Lazar 2006]. A second loss is the decrease in social capital and cohesion [Social Exclusion Unit 2000: 21; Berube and Katz 2005: 6]. For example, “last year’s intense rioting that began in Paris’ discontented *banlieue* of Clichy-Sous-Bois, is home to France’s most socially and economically excluded citizens” [Lazar 2006: 2]. This decrease is linked to a corresponding loss of faith in the political process by citizens in general, as big problems remained unresolved despite years of disjointed interventions [Social Exclusion Unit 2000: 21]. Finally, as neighbourhoods rely more heavily on state intervention when market forces fail, high costs are passed on to taxpayers [Berube and Katz 2005: 6; Social Exclusion Unit 2000: 24].

*Investing in neighbourhoods is making a positive impact.* While researchers conclude that investing in neighbourhoods matters, precisely how much is still uncertain due to challenges in research methodologies. We still need to know more about where and when to target interventions [Lupton 2003; UWGT/CCSD 2004: 7]. Recent investments in strengthening neighbourhoods are demonstrating the benefits of working in a new way on an old problem. This new way is collaborative and comprehensive, and is necessary to turn the tide of neighbourhood decline. The results give us hope [UWGT/CCSD 2004: 7; Rothman 2005; Rebuilding Communities Initiative; Neighbourhoods in Bloom Initiative; Social Exclusion Unit 2004].



## *What's in a name?*

People assign a range of meanings to commonly used terms so it is important to begin with some definitions. For our exploration, *neighbourhood* refers to a small area bound by both place and people. While specific physical boundaries can be determined, the boundaries among people are much fuzzier and yet very real. For this reason, some people use the terms *neighbourhood* and *community* interchangeably. “(T)he fluidity of the concept of *neighbourhood* means that its definition must vary according to the nature of the question being asked” [Infrastructure Canada 2005: 1-2]. An important characteristic of *neighbourhoods* is their tendency to change [MacLennan 2006: 3]. This feature has significant implications for our theory of change.

*Strengthening* means “to invigorate” and “to make lively, full of life.” In a *neighbourhood* context, *strengthening* is action taken to improve *neighbourhood* life. A wide range of actions are covered – from repairing and rebuilding houses, to making streets and public spaces safe for citizens to gather, to creating vehicles that empower residents to advocate for *neighbourhood* needs.

*Strengthening neighbourhoods*, then, is the process of improving the social, cultural, physical, environmental and economic assets of a “small, localized area around the home” [MacLennan 2006: 2]. The term “neighborhood revitalization” is commonly used in the United States; in the United Kingdom “*neighbourhood* regeneration” is more frequently employed. “Renewal” is another term used in many countries [Pomeroy 2006: 2-3].

*Strengthening neighbourhoods* is an example of a *complex problem* – problems that have neither agreed upon descriptions or solutions. “Complex problems involve multiple factors and diverse partners that continually shape and re-shape one another. Consequently, these problems can never be fully or finally solved” [Leviten-Reid 2006].

An emerging body of scientific knowledge on *complex adaptive systems* uses the analogy of living eco-systems versus machines to describe the behaviours of people working on complex versus simple problems – “system-level behavior cannot be reduced to the behavior of individual parts... The focus shifts from what *is* to what is *becoming*, from structure to dynamics” [Laszlo and Laugel 2000: 26]. While describing chaos and complexity theory is not the purpose of this tool, it is important to know a few key concepts. In general, all living systems will innovate (change), become more complex and deal with complexity by creating more order (converging). This is seldom a smooth or linear process and tends to speed up as more changes are introduced into the system. Eventually, a major new pattern will emerge and the system will fork off into a new direction [Laszlo and Laugel 2000: 28].

*Comprehensive community initiatives* are society’s way of addressing complex problems in a manner that is holistic, respectful of the needs the people who will be directly impacted by the initiative, multisectoral, long-term, developmental, inclusive and concerned with process and outcome [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003]. *Strengthening neighbourhoods* requires a comprehensive approach.

## ***What do we believe to be true about this work, based on our experience and research?***

It is important to make explicit our assumptions. As stated, strengthening neighbourhoods is complex, with multiple factors and diverse partners that continually shape and re-shape one another. Traditional linear “if we do A, then B will result” logic does not reflect the dynamic nature of strengthening neighbourhoods. It can feel like we are adrift in a sea of endless possibilities if we do not anchor ourselves at key points along the way. It is important to stop periodically to determine how far we have come and reorient ourselves for the next leg of the journey. Articulating our assumptions is part of our star chart.

We use the word assumptions as shorthand for: “These ideas are true in our experience to date and are supported by research regarding the experience of others.” With a complex problem, we need to be able to make decisions about how much evidence is good enough before we can take action responsibly and effectively.

### ***Destinations for the journey***

*Vision* – In Canada, all residents have the opportunity to participate in and lead community life, building strong neighbourhoods that are vital to economic prosperity and quality of life for all.

*Midpoints along the way* – Strengthening neighbourhoods begins with dialogue, bringing residents together to talk about their assets, needs and ideas. Neighbourhood residents create a shared understanding of what they can do together to improve the well-being of residents and the neighbourhood as a whole. Neighbourhood-specific actions are undertaken, often with the help of supporting organizations which are also initiating action to improve the larger operating environment. The impact of this action should be measured at key transition points to determine whether course corrections are required. A related perspective on midpoints is provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation:

Typically changes for individuals are the first thing that occurs as a result of the programs, services, actions or planned strategies of a community initiative. As individual changes reach greater scale, they may contribute to population level changes... The individual impacts are the building blocks of community change; if they do not happen, it is unlikely that the community will improve. However, these individual changes are not enough, by themselves, to ensure that positive changes will last [Annie E. Casey Foundation 2004: 3].

## ***Guiding principles***

*Place-based solutions are essential* – In the experience of ANC partners, interventions that are rooted in place are the key to long-term, sustainable change for complex problems like poverty and public safety. Current limitations in research methodology make it impossible to prove this without doubt. However, many jurisdictions have moved ahead with the data available and are using a place-based approach for change [Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force 2005; Urban Aboriginal Strategy; Social Exclusion Unit 2000; Rebuilding Communities Initiative; Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families 2002; Neighborhoods in Bloom Initiative; Bradford 2004; MacLennan 2006: 16; Pomeroy 2006: 9-10]. Place-based solutions recognize that neighbourhoods are more than the sum of their parts.

*Residents are at the heart of change* – Many neighbourhood interventions have failed in the past because they were planned and implemented top down. Priorities and strategies must be resident-led in order to take into account local knowledge and expertise, and to be sustainable [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2004: 2-6; Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force 2005: 17; Social Exclusion Unit 2000: 26; MacLennan 2006: 15; Pomeroy 2006: 28; Taylor-Powell and Rossing: 2]. Convening residents has many additional benefits – the gathering process “engages residents and breaks down the isolation that exists in marginalized neighbourhoods;” innovative programs emerge that are not normally delivered by agencies and “resident-led engagement underscores the value of self-determination, social justice, respect and diversity that are fundamental to healthy communities” [Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force 2006].

*Champions at many levels* – Local leadership is necessary but insufficient for sustainable change. International research points clearly to the need for leadership and support from both politicians and public servants. Lasting change requires resources from many, diverse people working within their spheres of influence [Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force 2005: 17; Social Exclusion Unit 2000; Rebuilding Communities Initiative; Neighborhoods in Bloom Initiative; Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2004; Auspos 2005: 5; Bradford 2004; MacLennan 2006; Pomeroy 2006].

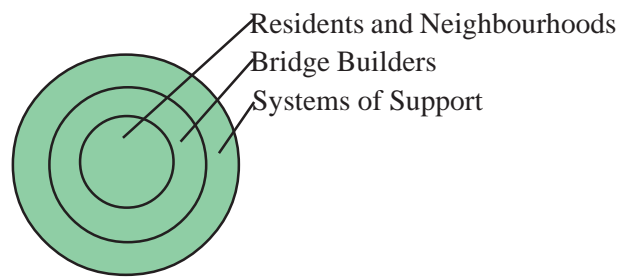
*Capacity building* – Strengthening neighbourhoods does not begin in a vacuum. There are existing social networks that can be tapped. Enhancing capacity typically requires additional and long-term support in the form of technical assistance, financing and access to information and data. It is essential to ensure that professionals who are part of the technical assistance do not become the “representative voice” of the neighbourhood, speaking and acting on their behalf [Roundtable 2002; Leviten-Reid 2006; Action for Neighbourhood Change 2005; Fraser and Lepofsky 2004].

*Comprehensive community initiative context* – Although residents and neighbourhoods are at the heart of this work, success usually depends on the support of others [Effectiveness of Community Interventions Project 2005; Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation 2001]. Within ANC, we described these interdependent roles as nested circles. *Bridge builders* are individuals and

local level organizations that function as intermediaries among residents, neighbourhoods and the larger “systems of support” [Figure 1]. Bridge building organizations often need to enhance their skill in managing relationships in order to fulfill this new role. In the case of ANC, this bridging function was undertaken by local United Ways.

The systems of support are found at local, regional and national levels. These systems may or may not be integrated and can include not-for-profit organizations, government at all levels, community-based agencies, educational institutions, and private sector companies and associations. Often an individual organization will play both a bridging and support role. In the case of ANC, the systems of support function was undertaken by five United Ways and their local partners, four national partners and five government sponsors.

Figure 1



*Messiness is a good sign* – As we have already indicated, strengthening neighbourhoods is a complex problem and neighbourhoods are part of complex adaptive systems. Progress towards the ultimate destination is non-linear and very messy on the surface. Messiness is a sign of the innovation that is required to solve complex problems [Fulbright-Anderson, Kubisch and Connell 1998].

*Long-term focus* – Neighbourhood data suggests that interventions can take ten years or more to show significant change. In order to effectively manage expectations, participants at all levels of this work need to be prepared to invest time and resources in the journey [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003: 7; Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force 2005: 15-16]. However, it is not necessary to wait ten years for signs of change and progress. This is discussed more fully below.

## **Processes**

*Asset-based, participatory and inclusive* – Practitioners involved in strengthening neighbourhoods have a bias. People asked to volunteer for collaborative activity generally are more likely to get involved if the starting point is “what we have” versus “what is wrong or missing.” They

are also conscious of a tendency to listen to “the loud voices” and know that these voices represent a small portion of the perspectives within the neighbourhood. They believe it is important to be intentional about making it easy for the broadest range of people to voice their perspectives. One of the earliest advocates for this approach is John McKnight at the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (<http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html>).

*Collaborative* – Strengthening neighbourhoods requires a collaborative approach. This is challenging in a culture that traditionally has rewarded command and control structures and behaviour. Collaboration is more than cooperation – it is fundamentally about sharing power. Rarely do people get stuck at the level of articulating a compelling vision – who would argue that healthy neighbourhoods are unimportant? Collaboration is demanding because groups which traditionally held power need to make decisions with new partners who previously had limited power. True collaboration becomes difficult in practice when decisions are made about finances, governance structures, and accountability and evaluation tools. The bridge building role takes on greater importance when new relationships are forming.

*Holistic but doable* – Piecemeal approaches that look at component parts of revitalization – such as housing, public safety or literacy – are unsuited to the complexity of neighbourhoods. At the same time, relatively little is known about how to chunk and sequence work on a number of fronts simultaneously without overwhelming the neighbourhood. Ongoing learning is essential to keep moving forward as effectively as possible [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003: 5; Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families 2002: 1-8; Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force 2005: 17; Social Exclusion Unit 2000: 28-30].

*Strategic and integrated* – When working on holistic but doable approaches, it is important to take advantage of the available information and to build data collection into the ongoing action plans. This blend of ‘the doing’ and ‘active learning’ is essential for strategic course correction.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it is important to bring together groups of planners who would not normally cross paths. For example, social services staff want to support clients in finding meaningful work with livable wages. Economic development staff focus on whether there are enough entrepreneurs in the region and whether area employers have a sufficient pool of potential employees. Opportunities to innovate are enhanced when these two types of planners find common objectives. Is one group’s client the other group’s new talent?

*Iterative* – Everyone involved in solving a complex problem must begin the work with a significant shift in mindset or attitude. This is a new area of policy-making and community development practice in which traditional programming and analysis will not work – the relationship between cause and effect is too complex. To quote one ANC project manager, “We are constantly in beta testing mode.” This conclusion significantly impacts how we work together:

- Government, private sector and foundation sponsors must think like a Research & Development department and be prepared to invest in and defend many well structured experiments that fail. These failures teach us how to improve our practice [Peach 2006].
- Community practitioners need to help sponsors, particularly government, take long-term investment risks by creating confidence that the investment will be protected. To do this, improvements in short- to medium-term indicators and feedback loops are critical [Peach 2006].
- Both sponsors and practitioners must work collaboratively with residents who need to take leadership roles in the planning and implementation of neighbourhood action plans.
- Collectively, a coherent strategy is required to integrate the efforts of all stakeholders.

### ***Thoughts on research and methodology***

Three broad themes emerged from the literature review in preparing this tool:

*Good enough* – There are great difficulties in evaluating the impact of neighbourhood strengthening efforts. Strong, empirical data linking the mechanics of investing in place with resident level outcomes do not exist. However, a wealth of data does exist demonstrating strong patterns of spatial concentration of poverty and other risk factors for neighbourhood decline. These patterns, combined with a political imperative to do something about this complex problem, are sufficient to warrant place-based investments.

*Qualitative versus quantitative methodologies* – A great deal of material has been written about this challenge. The complexity of strengthening neighbourhoods does not lend itself to cause and effect research that uses control groups to test and confirm hypotheses. While great progress has been made in developing rigorous qualitative methodologies, many sponsors expect the hard numbers. Experience in the past five years points to the value of combining both approaches.

*Combining methodologies* – Promising work is being done to blend qualitative and quantitative approaches so that long-term investors feel protected and those working in the neighbourhood have the flexibility they need to respond to changing circumstances and course correct as needed. Additional information on this topic is found in Appendix A.

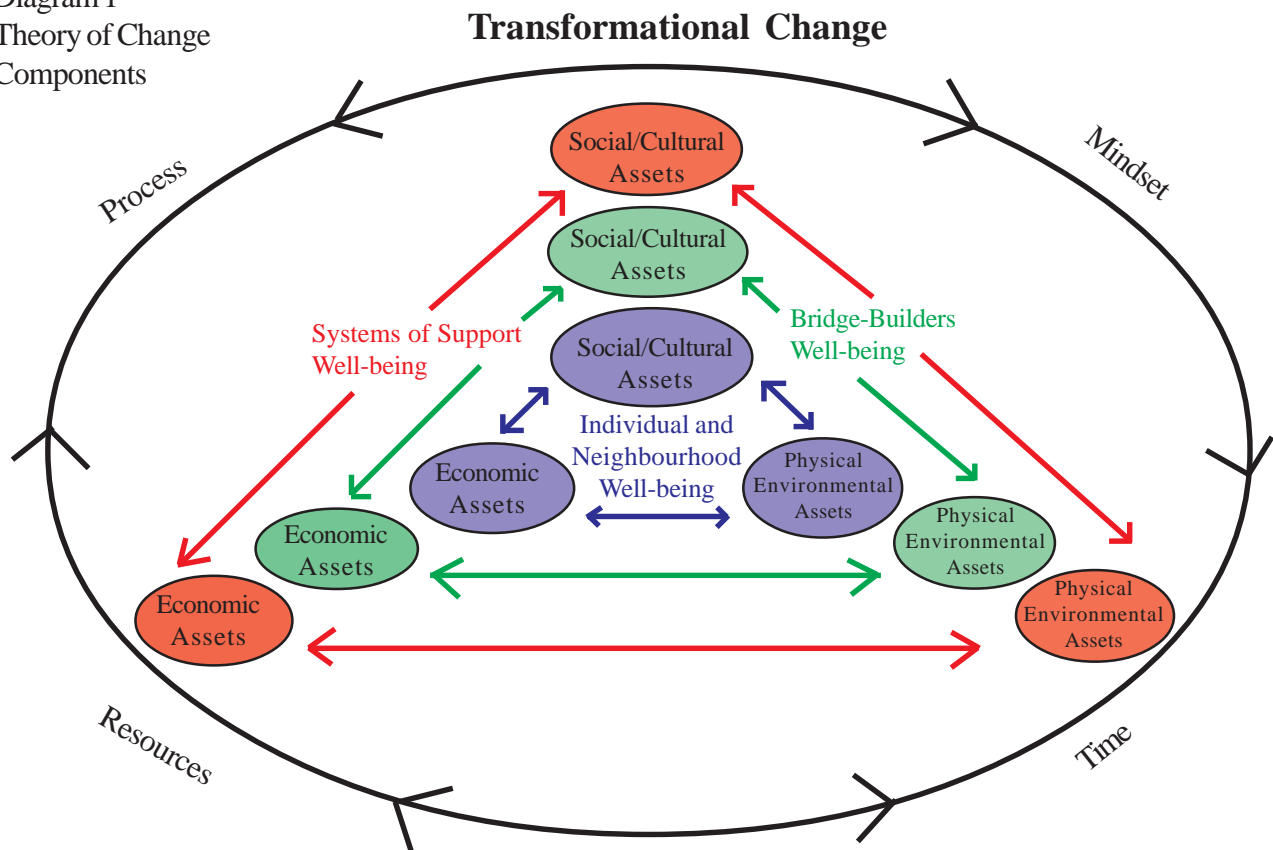


## Our orienteering experience – strengthening neighbourhoods theory of change

“A theory of change offers a picture of important destinations and guides you on what to look for on the journey to ensure you are on the right pathway” [Annie E. Casey Foundation 2004: 1]. Theories of change were popularized in the 1990s to capture important information about comprehensive community initiatives.

While normally used for specific initiatives, ANC participants believe there is value in articulating a more generic strengthening neighbourhoods theory of change. With the exception of housing initiatives in the 1970s, comprehensive programs *at the neighbourhood level* are relatively new in Canada. We hope that this high-level theory, based on experience and research, will guide the thinking of future participants in these efforts. The theory of change as well as the preliminary Neighbourhood Well-Being Index and logic model that follow can provide a jumping off point for both learning and accountability.

Diagram 1  
Theory of Change  
Components



This representation is credited to Pat Steenberg, ANC National Project Manager. February 2006.

The *ANC theory of change* maintains that the well-being of residents and neighbourhoods will be strengthened when they gain sufficient social, cultural, physical, environmental and economic assets. This requires collaborative neighbourhood governance that is resident-led in combination with comprehensive, system-wide support. This support is provided through organizations, that must be internally and collectively strong and healthy to fulfill their bridging and supportive roles. This bridging requires transformational change in terms of processes, mindsets, time and resources – i.e., champions, financial investment, technical assistance, research data and policy changes.

In traditional research, independent variables would be manipulated in a controlled environment to study the impact on dependent variables. These distinctions are less clear in activities that strengthen neighbourhoods due to the complex nature of the work. ANC partners have intentionally changed neighbourhood, bridge building and systems of supports assets to determine the impact of these assets upon well-being. In this instance, assets are independent variables and well-being is the dependent variable. Changes have also been made to processes, time, mindset and resources (independent variables) to determine their impact on assets (now a dependent variable). By intentionally focusing on these relationships, partners have been able to form and begin testing a theory of change. In order to understand these relationships, it is necessary to examine the component parts in more detail.

Neighbourhoods, bridge builders and the systems of support all have assets. The following examples provide a short description of *some* social and cultural assets within and among levels. Similar patterns are found among the physical/environmental and economic assets.

- Residents need to feel a certain level of trust and safety in order to become part of a neighbourhood association. By participating in such an association, they build both their personal and neighbourhood networks. In this way, social inclusion and capital are increased, a necessary condition for resident-led neighbourhood governance.
- Organizations involved in bridge building require staff with skills in facilitation and community capacity-building. This process will likely involve internal training and new work processes. The organizations will want to compare their experiences and progress with other organizations at informal meetings and sector conferences. They may even undertake a joint initiative to develop a broad vision and strategy for change.
- To create a culture of collaboration, organizations are exploring new forms of governance in order to fulfill systems of support roles. Local policy dialogues are forming, for example, to bring together all the players around specific issues, such as public safety or more general issues like strong neighbourhoods. In some cases, preliminary informal groups are exploring common interests which may lead to new forms of governance in future. An example of this approach is the federal Working Group on Neighbourhood Change. Provincial and municipal governments are involved in similar governance activities and are examples of other systems within the larger systems of support.



- To effectively harness the changes among neighbourhoods, bridge builders and the systems of support, a broad strategy and action plan are required. ANC is an early experiment in this regard.

Another feature of the theory is the absence of a preferred starting point. For example, neighbourhood renewal can begin virtually anywhere, depending on their circumstances and preferences. We have seen this flexibility within ANC – some neighbourhoods are beginning with neighbourhood safety (physical and environmental) while others focus on social inclusion (social and cultural) and housing standards (physical and environmental). These are all asset-focused starting points. At the same time, some project staff started quickly to engage systems of support organizations while others concentrated exclusively on the residents. These are relationship starting points. The equal relevance of various assets is represented by the triangle.

This starting point flexibility is also present among levels. As opportunities arise, stronger links and relationships can be developed. This potential was demonstrated through the ANC Policy Forum on Neighbourhood Revitalization and follow-up meeting in which members of the Vibrant Communities initiative were invited to participate.

It is important to note that no formal mechanisms are currently in place to manage the relationships among neighbourhoods, bridge builders and systems of support, nor among the many individual organizations that make up the bridge builders and these systems. This diagram represents the ideal. Within ANC we are working towards that ideal on the basis of good will and the commitment of individuals who have gone above and beyond their formal responsibilities. One thing that can be said for certain – this work is relationship-based. There is a natural tension between the perspectives of neighbourhoods, bridge builders and systems of support. If relationships are strong, then this tension can result in conflict that becomes a source of innovation rather than an irreconcilable difference.

Finally, comprehensive community initiatives require transformational change on the part of all stakeholders. This type of change is fundamentally different from developmental or transitional change. These differences are described as follows:

Transformation is unique in two critical ways. First, the future is unknown at the start of the change process and can only be created by forging ahead with the intent to discover it... Secondly, the future state is so radically different than the current state that a shift of mindset is required to invent it, let alone implement and sustain it. [Anderson and Anderson 2001: 3]

The outer circle in our theory of change captures the nature of transformational change itself. Stakeholders within neighbourhoods, bridging organizations and systems of support must all develop new processes, mindsets, resources and perspectives on time for change to occur. The following list provides a few examples:

- Processes (governance, communication, accountability, funding and capacity building) – involving residents on city-level planning committees; fundraising for a strengthening neighbourhoods initiative rather than individual agencies; and developing one evaluation framework for a project that has multiple government funders.
- Mindsets (attitudes, values, will/resolve) – residents believing that they can lead neighbourhood change; soft advocacy work is an essential part of the bridging role; and investment in activity that cuts across government departments is necessary.
- Resources (champions, financial investment, technical assistance, research data and policy changes) – training for resident leadership; knowledge management systems; and new funding tools and protocols.
- Perspectives on time (timing of interventions and assessment, stages of decline, length of time available) – work is long term but short- and medium-term impact is possible; people need time to build relationships.

Diagram 2:  
Theory of Change – over time

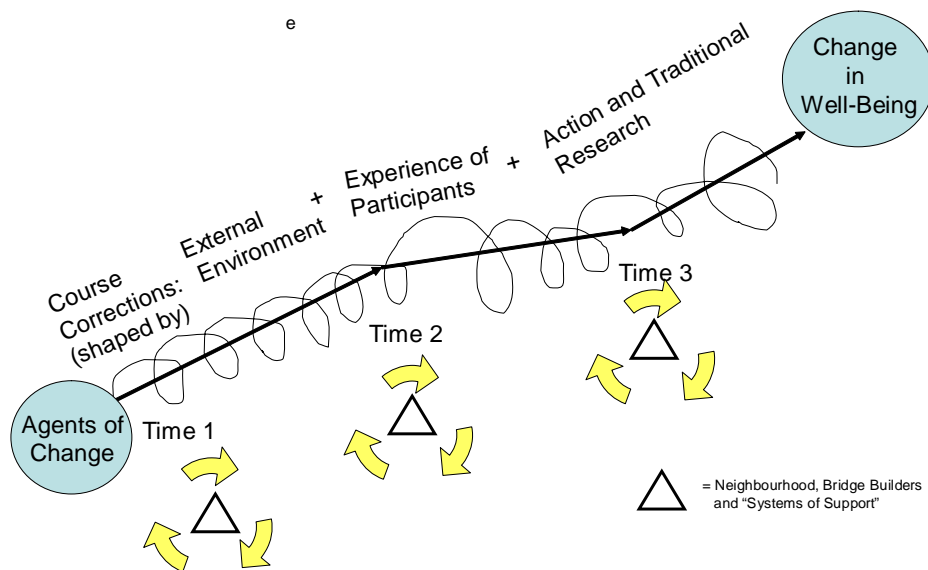


Diagram 2 illustrates the theory of change over time. For simplicity, the nested triangles from Diagram 1 are shown as one triangle, even though the rate of change will be different for each level and for each type of asset within a level. Diagram 2 illustrates the course corrections required over

time as a result of the complex nature of strengthening neighbourhoods and the transformational change required. These course corrections are shaped by changes in the external environment, such as shifts in the global economy, the experience of those involved in the revitalization initiative and the new learning that has resulted from tracking the results of interventions to date.

### ***What can reasonably be expected in the early days?***

Although significant changes in neighbourhood well-being will occur over a long period of time, many short- to medium-term effects can be measured. Past comprehensive community initiatives have been faulted for not providing some of these earlier results in a format that is useful for long-term investors [Auspos 2005]. By developing a set of indicators and a plan for evaluating progress on the basis of these indicators, those directly involved in strengthening neighbourhoods can be accountable without being in the impossible situation of trying to predict final projects or the success of any single initiative within a particular neighbourhood [Peach 2006].

The earliest indicators of progress are process-related as neighbourhoods begin to mobilize. Using the ANC experience, it is reasonable to expect that in the first year of operation, the following steps can be completed:

- Community development planning
  - Project team selected and organized
  - Resources secured
  - Mobilization planning process completed
  - Preliminary neighbourhood asset mapping and environmental scan completed
  - Community-level governance model completed.
  
- Neighbourhood engagement
  - Resident engagement reaches a level sufficient to create a neighbourhood governance structure that is resident-led
  - Resident leaders are provided with training to lead the next steps.
  
- Mission development by the neighbourhood
  - Preliminary neighbourhood asset mapping and environmental scan is reviewed and adjusted
  - New structures are created as necessary
  - A mission statement is written.
  
- Action plan development by the neighbourhood
  - Themes and priorities for action are identified
  - Screening and selection criteria for projects are developed
  - Mini-projects are initiated where resources are available

- Draft action plans are completed.
- Links are beginning to be made with the systems of support.
- Measurable indicators are developed.

Within the second year it is expected that the following steps can be completed:

- Action plan development
  - Full plan is developed and approved by the neighbourhood.
- Plan implementation
  - Resources secured
  - Project plans developed and implemented
  - Results communicated.
- Monitoring, learning and evaluation are used to course correct for the next year.

For additional information, please see the ANC project tools on community capacity building, neighbourhood planning, evaluation principles and governance prepared by Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement ([www.anccommunity.ca](http://www.anccommunity.ca)).

### ***How will we know that we are making progress? Measuring impact***

In addition to the evaluation principles guide being prepared, a small working group began to develop a Neighbourhood Well-being Index based on ANC experience and other research. It is expected that a draft will be ready in Spring 2006 and could be field-tested by the five sites in the next year. This index focuses attention on short- to long-term outcomes that can be expected. It currently identifies four major domains:

- Inclusion and Engagement – valued because people will be able to access additional resources together; having secured these resources together, it is more likely that these will serve the collective good; having developed stronger relationships, it is more likely that conflict among the group members will have a positive impact;
- Housing, Accessibility and Services – valued because people require basic needs met to pursue the collective good and neighbourhood development; community activity needs formal and informal spaces;
- Health and Safety – valued as a prerequisite for other indicators and as an outcome of basic personal needs;

- Economy – valued as a means of providing ongoing self-sufficiency and the opportunity to enhance and sustain quality of life.

Indicators, measures and data sources are still in development. The group has made initial contact with the Effectiveness of Community Interventions Project sponsored by Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada and will incorporate relevant indicators that are already field-tested. Models such as Sustainable Surrey are also being reviewed. This brings us to the extent of our current experience base in a Canadian context.

It will be helpful to factor in the experiences of the United Kingdom and the United States when taking this work to the next level. Both jurisdictions have devoted significant resources to evaluating comprehensive community initiatives. The UK put a new strategy in place to tackle the causes and consequences of social exclusion at neighbourhood and system-wide levels. Intensive investment has been made in economic causes of exclusion, early years development and education, and ‘joined up’ government. Their investment is yielding measurable results but significant problems remain in understanding the dynamics of neighbourhood change [Social Exclusion Unit 2004].

A major US evaluation by the Aspen Institute’s Roundtable on the Contribution of Community Building Project has identified that “community building is an important precursor to community change because it builds a platform that can be instrumental in accomplishing other things” [Auspos 2005: 4]. The study goes on to say that community building contributes to “changes in the individuals who reside in the community; changes in the internal programs and institutions that serve the community; and changes in outside actors and systems that interact with the community, provide services or programs, or affect the physical conditions or environment within the community” [Auspos 2005: 5].

Clearly, evaluation is a work in progress internationally as well as in Canada.

### ***Where are we going? The long-term vision***

A logic model builds on a theory of change and illustrates visually how program components are linked to outcomes. It takes the high-level vision of strengthening neighbourhoods and links it to inputs, activities, structures and finally to measurement of results.

While ANC participants have confidence in the theory of change based on our collective experience over the past year, we are less certain of the logic model elements due to the early developmental stage of the project. That said, research and our experience to date provide a sufficient base for a preliminary model which is provided in Appendix B. As ANC work matures and future strengthening neighbourhoods projects are undertaken in Canada, this model can be refined and made more robust.

## ***Refining this work in the future***

Future work must continue to address the tension between the qualitative and quantitative research approaches. More work is required within ANC to harmonize the theory of change and the preliminary Neighbourhood Well-Being Index and logic model. Theories about change movements and movement building also need to be embedded in more detailed versions of the theory of change. This would include exploring the mechanics of how to strengthen relationships among and within the three levels – neighbourhoods, bridge builders and systems of support. Additional work is required to understand the processes of strengthening neighbourhoods, including the degree to which successful initiatives are localized and cannot be replicated elsewhere.

## ***Concluding thoughts***

It would be easy to become overwhelmed by the complexity of strengthening neighbourhoods. Alternatively, we can choose to enter this work with the spirit of adventure displayed by early explorers who sailed off to find the end of the world with nothing more than a ship and rudimentary maps to guide the way. Participants of ANC offer this tool in that same spirit, knowing we have done a good job of pushing off from shore and charting our route so far.

## **Endnotes**

1. Government departments were restructured after ANC began. The department names as they existed at the beginning of the project are used in this paper.
2. In this context, “strategic” is used to describe an intentional approach regarding resource management. Knowing what we do at this point, do we need to adjust our future plans to make the most effective use of our resources?

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## Appendix A: Qualitative and quantitative methodologies in strengthening neighbourhood research

**The following reports are important guides for organizations wishing to pursue neighbourhood-level research:**

Auspos, P. (2005). *The Contribution of Community Building Project: Crosscutting Issues and Lessons*. Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute, September.

- Builds on previous two Aspen Institute studies

Auspos, P. and A. Kubisch. (2004). *Building Knowledge About Community Change: Moving Beyond Evaluations*. Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute, November.

- Builds on Fulbright-Anderson et al with new research and framework.

Earl, S., F. Carden and T. Smutylo. (2001). *Outcome Mapping: The Challenges of Assessing Development Impacts*. International Development Research Centre (Canada).

- Highly readable user's manual for mapping and measuring process outcomes for relationship building
- [http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-9330-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-9330-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)

Effectiveness of Community Interventions Project. (2005). *ECIP Overview and Background Paper*. Unpublished draft.

- A three-year interdepartmental initiative between the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada, which began in October 2003
- The overall goals of ECIP are to:
  - Provide a model/tool to help in assessing the effectiveness of community interventions
  - Increase the dialogue around the measurement of effectiveness among program areas
  - Encourage further investigation on effectiveness related to community interventions.
- [http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/php-psp/pru\\_2\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/php-psp/pru_2_e.html)

Fulbright-Anderson, K., A. Kubisch and J. Connell. (1998). *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives: Volume 2 Theory, Measurement and Analysis*. Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute.

- In-depth framework for evaluation

GHK International. (2005). *Measuring Neighbourhood Vitality*. Toronto: January.

- Background research prepared for the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force
- International research and recommendations for Toronto

Lupton, R. (2003). *'Neighbourhood Effects': Can we measure them and does it matter?*

- London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, September.
- Detailed analysis of limitations in quantitative methodology and the lack of impact this has had on investment decisions

Mayne, J. (2003). *Reporting on Outcomes: Setting Performance Expectations and Telling Performance Stories*. Ottawa: Office of the Auditor General of Canada, April.

- Discussion paper describing a Canadian framework for blending qualitative and quantitative approaches to measuring impact
- Advantage – written in language that Auditor General can support

Oakes, J.M. (2003). “The (mis)estimation of neighbourhood effects: Causal inference for practicable social epidemiology.” *Social Science and Medicine* 58: 1929-1952.

- Highly technical article on methodology

Taylor-Powell, E. and B. Rossing. (undated). *Evaluating Collaborations: Challenges and Methods*. <http://danr.ucop.edu/eee-aea/rossing.html>

- Practical guide for evaluation

## **Appendix B: Strengthening Neighbourhoods Logic Model**

This preliminary model is based on the social economy logic model developed by Torjman and Leviten-Reid [2006: 13]. It also builds on the theory of change identified in this paper. Readers should note that it is unlikely that specific strengthening neighbourhoods initiatives will address all the activities and structures in this model.

Torjman, S. and E. Leviten-Reid. (2006). *Evaluation Framework for Federal Investment in the Social Economy: A Discussion Paper*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, January.

## Strengthening Neighbourhoods Logic Model

