Organizing for Neighbourhood Revitalization

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Introduction

This paper focuses upon neighbourhood revitalization within the context of complexity theory. It was written in association with a related document *The Enabling Environment for Community Work*. Both papers were developed as part of a forthcoming book entitled *Shared Space*: *The Communities Agenda*. The book is intended to support the work of comprehensive community initiatives, including efforts like Action for Neighbourhood Change.

The pan-Canadian Action for Neighbourhood Change was created to find effective ways to support neighbourhood revitalization. It involved national partners, five local United Ways and five federal partners in an effort to improve the quality of life in selected neighbourhoods across the country. The local partners were United Ways in Halifax, Toronto, Thunder Bay, Regina and Surrey.

Neighbourhood revitalization is linked intrinsically to an emerging area of work, known as the communities agenda [Torjman 2006]. The goal of the communities agenda is to promote resilience in order to build strong and healthy communities. Four main domains of action – related to sustenance, adaptation, engagement and opportunity – are involved in fostering resilience.

Each of these resilience domains can be understood as a cluster of activity – or area of 'shared space.' The notion of clusters is used frequently in the economic development literature to refer to strategic groupings of producers, suppliers and developers of knowledge. A local economy can be considered as a set of major clusters with close interactions and links. Activity within the clusters acts as the driver of economic prosperity [Economic Development Administration 1997].

Building on this thinking, the communities agenda argues that there are four major social clusters. Taken together, these social clusters act as the drivers of the social agenda [Torjman 2006]. Neighbourhood revitalization essentially involves work in these major clusters of shared space.

Regardless of the cluster(s) upon which the neighbourhood decides to focus its efforts, there are three main tasks to be carried out. It must develop an evidence base to support the selected interventions that it decides to pursue. The neighbourhood must determine when and how to engage in collaborative working relationships, where feasible and appropriate. Finally, progress toward identified goals must be monitored on an ongoing basis with results fed back into the revitalization effort for course correction as required.

Prior to embarking upon any of this work in the shared space, communities – and neighbourhoods in the case of Action for Neighbourhood Change – must organize themselves effectively to tackle the complex issues they face. This paper focuses upon the local governance processes involved in organizing for complexity and their associated challenges.

Core resilience clusters

The framework that comprises the communities agenda is shaped in large part by the concept of *resilience* – deemed relevant because it deals fundamentally with the ability not just to cope but to thrive in the face of tough problems and continual change. The notion of resilience is rooted in the thinking on sustainable development whose purpose is to improve the quality of life for all humanity. It considers environmental, economic, social and cultural domains as equally important factors in the societal equation.

The ecological literature on resilience is probably the most widely recognized application of the concept. The ecological dimension of resilience emphasizes the ability of an ecosystem to adapt to change. However, the concept of resilience also figures prominently in mental health literature and in studies of child development. The wide-ranging research in the fields of ecology and mental health together point to four groups of independent but linked activity – related to sustenance, adaptation, engagement and opportunity – that contribute to resilience.

The *sustenance* cluster focuses primarily upon the basics required for physical and emotional well-being. Decent affordable housing is of prime concern. Suitable accommodation is linked to physical health while housing stability has been found to affect emotional well-being. Growth in the supply of affordable housing not only is good for physical health and emotional stability. It also reduces the proportion of household budget directed toward accommodation, leaving more room for spending on such areas as nutritious food, warm clothing and adequate heating.

The sustenance cluster also seeks improvements to wages and income security programs. It involves actions that increase disposable income by reducing the cost of basics.

The adaptation cluster consists of the group of actions concerned primarily with basic coping skills and capacities. Skills related to empathy, problem-solving and literacy proficiency comprise the essence of adaptive capacity. Adaptation is effectively a form of social immunization that involves the ability to cope in a changing world. Physical capacity to cope with illness and disease is enhanced through vaccination and immune-bolstering factors such as adequate rest, healthy diet and clean air. Social capacity is similarly developed through actions that contribute to adaptation including the building of self-esteem, empathy, problem-solving capacity and literacy proficiency.

The resilience cluster related to *engagement* is concerned with active participation in society. It entails more than simply adapting to social and economic pressures. Engagement reflects a sense of agency – the notion that individuals and communities can take control of circumstances that affect their lives. Cultural expression, and involvement in public discourse, community decision-making processes, volunteering and recreation – all are representations of agency. The voices and views of citizens actually count for something. Their social footprint is authentic and significant.

Citizens who participate actively and meaningfully in their communities tend to be happier and healthier – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Those with limited access to opportunities for participating or who are excluded generally fare less well. Resilience is the result not only of meeting basic needs and bolstering the ability to adapt to and cope with change. It also implies the active engagement of citizens as shapers of their communities – and of their own future.

Opportunity comprises the fourth resilience cluster. One stream of work in this cluster involves direct investment in work-related skills. Recent efforts have sought to make training more relevant to the needs and demands of the labour market. Customized training is an example of this trend. It creates bridges among voluntary organizations, the private sector, educational institutions and governments in an effort to find employment for marginalized workers.

Another set of actions in the opportunity cluster involves the creation of economic opportunities within the context of community economic development – the set of activities and organizations stemming from collective entrepreneurship and guided by principles of democratic engagement and shared profit. These actions represent investments in local infrastructure.

The opportunity cluster is also concerned with building assets, through measures such as individual development accounts, learning bonds and homeownership. Building financial assets is considered a significant intervention not only for improving sustenance and the capacity to engage in society. It also helps foster independence and choice, and again creates a sense of agency and hope for a better future.

Taken together, the core domains that contribute to resilience comprise the substance of the communities agenda. Resilience is the result of substantial and diverse activity in all four domains, both individually and together. Each domain must be healthy and robust. The challenge is to find ways to make this happen.

Each resilience cluster is a complex system in itself. Each is composed of a wide set of actors and actions. Each has a set of parts that contribute to the overarching objective of resilience. The problem is that most of the activities within a given cluster function as separate entities within that cluster. The component parts rarely operate like a system. They are a set of disjointed pieces in which the left hand is often unaware of what the right hand is doing. The parts frequently work at cross-purposes. Links between and among clusters must be cultivated in order to create a coherent agenda overall.

In sustenance, for example, activity concerned with affordable housing generally is not carried out with reference to policies linked to income security. In adaptation, early childhood development workers rarely engage with those involved in literacy proficiency – even though their efforts may focus upon the same households. In the engagement cluster, those working with marginalized youth or newcomers who are excluded from the mainstream of society are just beginning to build bridges with the cultural and arts worlds. In the opportunity domain, activity concerned with skills development typically is separate from the creation of employment opportunities.

Most individuals, groups, organizations and even policies whose interests fall within the same cluster act like ships that pass in the night. There are far too few links among the wide-ranging interventions within the core resilience clusters. The links that do exist are often minimal or sub-critical – in that they do not create substantive shifts as a result of their exchange. The impact of individual efforts typically is diminished as a result. Moreover, the lack of collaboration can even create negative effects when the impact of one intervention actually works at cross-purposes to another.

Community challenges generally are addressed as distinct factors despite the fact that they are intrinsically linked and require a set of interwoven strategies for effective intervention. Comprehensive local efforts seek to forge links between and among these key factors. Moreover, there are not enough points of interface to create genuine joined-up solutions. The core resilience clusters have not bred the innovation that potentially is possible because they consist of isolated pockets of intervention focused upon their own individual concerns. The task of the communities agenda is figure out how to harness these clusters of activity in unique ways.

Collaboration is a core method. It is a broad concept that refers to a wide range of engage-ment possibilities – from the simple exchange of information to deeply entangled joint ventures. Included in the collaboration continuum are: information exchange, shared learning and training, integrated development plans and initiatives, consolidated application procedures and protocols, joint procurement and common evaluation.

Despite diverse definitions and forms of collaboration, these relationships are linked by a common foundational principle: The whole is generally greater than the sum of its parts. There is an underlying assumption that the results of a shared effort typically are larger and deeper than what any single person, group or organization alone can achieve. Within the context of the communities agenda, collaboration involves the creation of links among existing players within the cluster or forging new relationships within and between clusters. Joint work is not an end in itself but is the means to an end – whether it be improved service delivery or a bigger objective like reducing poverty.

A core task of the communities agenda is to create healthy resilience clusters by improving the links among actors within each of the clusters. There is a need for bridging mechanisms that can join up the various components into more cohesive processes.

A second core task of the communities agenda is to improve the links among the core resilience clusters. Examples of this type of bridging currently are the exception rather than the rule. But the exceptions show the vast potential of making links in the shared space between clusters. A co-operative housing project in Saskatoon, for instance, built in a training component in which residents learned the skills of housing repair and management. They were trained how to take care of their property, and thereby acquire a marketable skill. This particular initiative worked in the shared space between the sustenance and opportunity clusters.

A third core task of the communities agenda is to improve the links among communities and governments. It seeks to narrow the gap between community needs and government policy at all levels. One of the most positive features about comprehensive approaches, like the neighbourhood revitalization work in Action for Neighbourhood Change, is that complexity is written into their very blueprints, embedded in both their substance and process. They recognize the various components of tough problems and the related parts.

Comprehensive efforts acknowledge that a complex set of 'joined up' actions is required to promote resilience. They are a positive response to the fact that traditional methods of dealing with issues – single programs to tackle identified problems – are inappropriate. The new synthesis endorses the idea that the multiple and interrelated problems of so-called 'vulnerable' neighbourhoods require multiple and interrelated solutions.

Finally, in order to pursue both the substance and process activities that comprise the communities agenda, it is important to ensure the presence of a supportive context that promotes comprehensive community initiatives, including neighbourhood revitalization. The related paper on *The Enabling Environment for Community Work* discusses the core elements that make up this supportive context.

But before embarking upon work within any of the clusters, communities and neighbourhoods – in the case of Action for Neighbourhood Change – must establish a process for making decisions about appropriate interventions. If communities are to promote resilience, they must move to more complex decision-making processes than the ones now in place.

New structures to tackle complex challenges

Municipal governments generally assume responsibility for addressing local challenges. But there are serious limitations in current government processes. The reality of political cycles often makes it difficult to sustain the long-term planning and intervention required to tackle complex problems. Government structures typically prevent the joining up of component pieces – such as training, transportation and child care – even though this type of integrated approach is the most effective way to achieve comprehensive change.

The first important step in any neighbourhood revitalization effort is to set up a local process that enables a community or neighbourhood to make decisions on its own behalf – to determine the nature of its issues, preferred strategies, unique strengths and clear challenges. This approach is often referred to as a local governance process.

While local governance bodies are not elected structures, they seek explicitly to identify and harness the range of assets embedded in communities, no matter how impoverished or 'distressed.'

Local governance processes make a deliberate and conscious effort to capture the diversity of the community or neighbourhood in both demographic profile and sectoral composition. Nor are they hampered by the rhythms and constraints of the political process. They can develop plans that are longer term in vision and scope than can municipal strategies that are often shaped by electoral mandates.

It is of interest that the emergence of local governance structures actually embodies, at a community and neighbourhood level, a major transformation under way throughout the world. The shift *from government to governance* reflects a move away from governing by detailed rules and regulations set out in acts of parliament to decision-making by frame-setting legislation. The articulation of more thorough regulation and policies is left to local institutions and actors [Torjman 2002].

The importance of local governance is also embedded in the notion of sustainable development. A move toward more sustainable forms of development requires significant changes in decision-making. Creating an appropriate governance framework and the necessary tools to assist local efforts is central to the goal of achieving sustainable communities.

Local governance bodies have been especially active in the neighbourhood revitalization work within Action for Neighbourhood Change. They act as a common voice. They help set a guiding vision for the community and its associated strategic plan. They determine the resilience clusters and specific areas of shared space upon which to focus. They identify and bring together diverse players to make these decisions.

The governance body formulates, implements and evaluates all aspects of the neighbourhood revitalization strategy. Its work is guided by the principle of inclusion. Local residents are seen not simply as targets or subjects of the proposed interventions but rather participate actively in the formulation and application of these actions. Their involvement helps ensure the relevance of the work.

Local governance structures also harness resources, including appropriate financing. They link the comprehensive initiative with relevant organizations, projects and resources in the broader community. They provide opportunities for learning and monitoring results on an ongoing basis.

Of course, local governance bodies do not simply emerge on their own. They must be convened by an individual, group or organization able to act in this capacity. An effective convener must be a local actor with the ability to bring together many different parties with diverse interests.

The convener usually has a designated role in the community – political position such as mayor or city official, local funder like a United Way or representative of a certain interest, such as robust economy or active social services. In the case of Action for Neighbourhood Change, the United

Ways in Halifax, Toronto, Thunder Bay, Regina and Surrey have acted as the conveners of the neighbourhood process. The leadership challenges embedded in the convening role are discussed below.

Key elements of local governance

i. Fostering inclusion and diversity

The shift from government to governance has seen citizens assume an increasingly active role in decisions that affect their lives. Their occasional vote is not enough to make most feel that they are part of a democratic society in which their concerns are heard – let alone addressed. While governments are the primary formulators of policy, there is growing recognition of the need to engage the potential targets of any measure and citizens, more generally, in articulating policy questions and developing feasible options.

Comprehensive community initiatives, such as neighbourhood revitalization work, must create opportunities for involving a wide array of residents, especially people living in poverty, racialized youth and Aboriginal Canadians who are often marginalized from these processes and community life more generally. Groups that are usually targeted for special consideration need to participate actively in local decision-making.

It is of interest that the diversity theme is embedded deeply in the concept of resilience [Folke, Colding and Berkes 2002]. Studies of resilient ecosystems have shown that the ability to thrive in a changing context is greatly enhanced through diversity. Adaptive capacity in ecological systems is a function of genetic, biological and landscape variety.

From the perspective of the communities agenda, this diversity must be reflected not only through demographics. The sharing of decision-making responsibility involves multiple linkages among citizens, government departments, the private sector and voluntary organizations. It also requires the collaboration of diverse stakeholders operating at local, regional, provincial, national and international levels.

The work under way in Scarborough Village in Toronto provides an example of this diversity. With 13,725 residents, it is the largest of the five sites that comprise Action for Neighbourhood Change. Forty-nine percent of residents have a home language other than English and 8,372 were born outside of Canada. ANC organizers needed to find a way to make contact with residents in their home languages [Makhoul 2007].

ANC staff had previous experience locating and training individuals as 'community animators' – residents who act as links to the community – during the redesign and reconstruction of Toronto-based Regent Park in 2004. Those considered to be ideal candidates for this work have established connections, trust and networks with a particular ethnic or linguistic group. Using community animators to develop and build an understanding of the revitalization being undertaken within Action for Neighbourhood Change helped demonstrate respect for linguistic and cultural difference. Through key informant interviews, staff identified possible animator candidates, eventually hiring nine individuals – two each who spoke Tamil, Urdu and Bengali, one youth and two Afro-Caribbean residents [Makhoul 2007].

Not surprisingly, the engagement of local residents is often easier said than done. It is impossible for any group – let alone a local project with modest funding – to be entirely representative of the broader community. Any given effort must be aware of the need to move toward greater diversity and monitor continually how well it is doing in this regard.

Another challenge around inclusion relates to the logistics of participation. Many people living in poverty have not been involved in these kinds of local revitalization efforts. The 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. Both the formal procedures of such meetings and the language may be foreign, creating barriers to participation.

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

Lessons from community-based governance structures include the fact that it is important to hold meetings in places like community centres and libraries where all members feel welcome and comfortable. It is also helpful to provide practical assistance, like child care subsidies or services to ensure that parents can participate. Ideally, meetings are combined with a nutritious meal and child care is made available on site.

Some communities have created advisory groups of low-income residents who serve as a sounding board for local initiatives. These groups can give feedback on priority issues, how the initiative presents the poor in its public communication and the most helpful ways to undertake identified strategies. The Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood of Thunder Bay within the Action for Neighbourhood Change, for example, established a Neighbourhood Advisory Committee to provide this advice. The Committee evolved from a collection of residents interested in advancing a neighbourhood vision to an advisory committee with clearly defined goals and roles.

To ensure an efficient but community-centred process, ANC organizers arranged for a professional facilitator to meet with the fledgling neighbourhood association in February 2006. Participants spent time discussing their reasons for involvement in Action for Neighbourhood Change and their neighbourhood's assets. A second full-day meeting identified common concerns as well as areas where work could begin immediately. By the end of that day, the group of engaged residents had established a neighbourhood vision and mapped out a preliminary plan for early-win projects [Makhoul 2007].

ii. Understanding the complexities

At the heart of the communities agenda – and of neighbourhood revitalization more specifically – is the ability to see and appreciate the complexity of both the local context and its unique challenges. As discussed, the creation of a local governance structure, diverse in both demography and sectoral representation, is the starting point for a comprehensive response. It is the body in which shared minds and perspectives can view the world through a complexity lens.

The factors that comprise a given problem are often so intrinsically linked that it is difficult to pinpoint a single trigger or sole cause. In fact, communities and even neighbourhoods typically face a cluster of interrelated complexities rather than a single problem. It is not surprising that the UK refers to these tough challenges as "wicked problems" [Bogdanor 2005: 6].

Take, for example, the question of poverty concentration in urban centres. While less acute than American cities, there has been growing income polarization and geographic concentration of low income in many Canadian neighbourhoods. In 2004, Statistics Canada reported that poverty had become increasingly concentrated in low-income neighbourhoods in the nine largest urban centres in the country. The number of high-poverty neighbourhoods had jumped from 190 in 1980 to 291 by the year 2000 [Heisz and McLeod 2004: 49-53].

A comprehensive report entitled *Poverty by Postal Code* was published in 2004 as part of research into social issues being undertaken by the United Way of Greater Toronto. The study was followed by the report of the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force, which underpins the work of the Action for Neighbourhood Change site in Toronto.

Poverty by Postal Code had found a substantial rise in the poverty rate among Toronto families over the last two decades, with almost one in five households living in poverty in 2001. The report also geographically mapped the growing concentration of poverty in certain neighbourhoods. It found, for instance, that one in three lone parents and one-third of the visible minority population now lives and raises their families in high-poverty neighbourhoods. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of children growing up in high-poverty neighbourhoods doubled and their numbers were disproportionately higher than the city as a whole [UWGT and CCSD 2004: 12].

Unemployment in these areas, not surprisingly, was greater than the city as a whole. By 2001, close to one-half of the renter neighbourhoods in high-poverty neighbourhoods and 43 percent of all renter households throughout the city were in core housing need, paying more than 30 percent of their income on rent [UWGT and CCSD 2004: 12].

In addition to the dramatic rise in the concentration and incidence of low income, *Poverty by Postal Code* noted the growth in high-poverty neighbourhoods, which have almost doubled every ten years since 1981. The number rose from 30 high-poverty neighbourhoods in that year to 66 in 1991 and 120 by 2001. In 1981, there were four very high-poverty neighbourhoods. The figure more than doubled to nine in 1991 and then jumped to 23 by 2001 – nearly six times their number in 1981 [UWGT and CCSD 2004: 7].

But these so-called distressed neighbourhoods are defined by more than the concentration of poverty. They are characterized as well by a constellation of factors, which include teenage pregnancy and high proportion of lone-parent families, low levels of full-time school attendance, poor literacy skills, higher rates of chronic and mental illness, housing instability, substance abuse and crime, greater numbers of working age adults without market income and disproportionate reliance on government income security programs.

It is not possible within this confluence of factors to say that one single dimension is the primary root cause of the 'distress' and that the other factors ensue as a result. The problem at hand – in this case high rates of inner-city poverty – could have been triggered by any one or several of these elements. A range of possible drivers, either singly or in combination, may be responsible.

For some households, poverty may result from poor literacy skills, which made it difficult for the family head to find decent employment. Teenage pregnancy may prevent young women from completing their high school education and finding suitable employment. In other households, illness or disability may have significantly interrupted or even prevented participation in the paid labour market. In short, multiple starting points can lead to the same result – in this case, low income.

This example is meant to illustrate a general point: The presence of diverse factors at play in a given set of circumstances means that there are many possible starting gates for taking action to tackle the problem. The challenge for neighbourhood revitalization – and for the local governance body at the heart of the effort – is to find the appropriate levers or points of intervention.

The framework on resilience within the context of the communities agenda argues the need to take action in all core resilience clusters – sustenance, adaptation, engagement and opportunity. It may not be possible to work in all clusters at the same time. But it is at least feasible to think in four domains and to understand the links among their constituent parts. It is also appropriate to sequence a strategic plan that ultimately involves intervention in all four clusters.

Because different routes may be taken to achieve a desired objective, there is growing recognition of the need to state clearly the rationale for the pathway that neighbourhoods have chosen to pursue. The challenge for the local initiative lies in the articulation of its intended strategy. In fact, evaluation models currently being developed around complex themes refer to this formulation as the 'theory of change' that underlies the specific actions.

Theory of change implies an intended pathway – or linked sequence of steps that lead to a set of desired goals. The neighbourhood may assume that certain residents are poor because they lack access to affordable housing. It may decide to launch a series of actions to reduce the numbers of households living on low income. Another neighbourhood may determine, by contrast, that the poverty experienced by designated groups results from lack of access to training and employment opportunities. It may choose to embark upon an entirely different approach to the problem.

A theory of change statement is a brief description of the context in which the initiative is taking place, the goals and targets it is pursuing and the strategies it has adopted. It presents the ideas and assumptions guiding the initiative and explains the unfolding pathway it anticipates following to achieve its intended results. The theory of change serves as a conceptual baseline against which progress and lessons learned can be identified as the initiative evolves [Leviten-Reid 2005: 4].

> Within ANC, turning theory into methodology has meant that neighbourhood renewal should begin by mapping the assets already present and determining their strength. Next, organizers need to determine which change strategies or interventions are most likely to rally residents and supportive organizations in the short- to medium-term. Experience demonstrates that early, visible action is critically important – residents must be convinced that an initiative has the resources – human and financial – to make change happen. However, a long-term focus and commitment to change is essential to maintaining the momentum of the work [Makhoul 2007: 3].

Once the community has identified its desired objective, it then engages in a process of 'backwards mapping' to determine how to reach that goal. It starts at the end and works back to spell out the steps to be taken in respect of that objective. Part of the work involves an identification of community assets.

iii. Moving from problems to assets

Traditional approaches to local intervention generally have assessed communities and neighbourhoods from the perspective of their weaknesses. Emerging approaches, by contrast, view communities and neighbourhoods as the sum of their strengths. Comprehensive initiatives start with the premise that, in order to be successful, development must have its roots planted firmly in the neighbourhood and must harness its key assets in the form of local talent, commitment, skills and resources.

The asset-based approach to community development clearly acknowledges the deep-rooted problems with which communities must grapple. It does not gloss them over or pretend that these have no impact upon local psychology. It recognizes, for example, that economic production has changed dramatically with a loss in manufacturing and outsourcing of employment beyond the borders not only of communities but also the country. Shifting economic sands have been linked to poverty, crime and substance abuse.

The concept and practice of asset-based community development effectively see the conventional needs-driven path as a dead end. The alternative route focuses upon capacities and strengths. It opens up a range of possible interventions not previously considered. A capacity framework leads to the development of policies and activities based on abilities, skills and assets – especially of low-income people and their neighbourhoods – as a way to move constructively toward solutions.

The resource manual *Building Communities from the Inside Out* sets out a framework and practical advice for finding and mobilizing a community's assets [Kretzmann and McKnight 1993]. It outlines the potential gifts – especially of community members such as young people, persons with disabilities and seniors – typically considered to have little to offer in the way of positive contributions.

Of course, identifying assets can be a major challenge in itself. The glass-half-empty mindset is not trained to recognize strengths. It is often difficult to identify capacity when the siren call is the set of problems around which the community or neighbourhood has rallied. *Building Communities from the Inside Out* sets out a proposed inventory to map both individual capacities and the assets of communities.

The inventory of personal skill, in particular, is wide-ranging and substantial. Virtually every aspect of household management, including window washing, household cleaning, lawn mowing, catering, bartending, dishwashing and driving a car or van, is considered a valuable skill. To that is added the list of community skills, such as organizing church dinners, doing yard work and participating in parent-teacher associations.

Together these lists of capacities carry a strong message: Most people have a wide range of abilities that are rarely recognized as strengths or exceptional qualities. Many of these skills can form the basis of a business or enterprise.

It is of interest that this asset-based approach is consistent with the notion of capacities put forward in the Nobel prize-winning book *Development as Freedom* [Sen 1999]. The central thesis of this book is that healthy human development is a function not only of what individuals *have* in the form of concrete assets but also of what they can *do* in terms of their abilities. Human development must be concerned with both poverty and capability – the capacity to cope, adapt, grow and thrive through access to skills and opportunities.

This notion of innate strengths applies equally well to communities and neighbourhoods. Every community – no matter how poor or impoverished – is rich in resources. Communities also have innate resiliences or assets that provide a strong foundation upon which to build. Every community and neighbourhood can work from a position of strength despite the fact that it typically is viewed from the perspective of its weaknesses.

In its *Community Resilience Manual*, for example, the Centre for Community Enterprise identifies 23 local assets that are associated with resilience, such factors as the outlook of citizens, quality of their relations and availability of financial and organizational resources. The manual describes how a community can assess its vitality in respect of these features and take intentional action to meet the challenge of change on an ongoing basis [Colussi, Lewis and Rowcliffe 2000].

The concept of assets also figures prominently in a body of literature on sustainable livelihoods [Department for International Development 1999]. This work is concerned with the ways in which communities self-organize to ensure that all members have access to the basics of life. This body of literature identifies the major pools of capital – natural (land, stocks of natural resources and ecosystems), built or produced capital, social, human and financial – upon which communities can draw to create sustainable livelihoods.

Growing interest in pools of capital has helped shift attention from a sole focus upon traditional measures of economic activity, such as gross domestic product (GDP), to investment in different forms of wealth that underpin development. The capital model is being employed in the development of indicators by national and international bodies, such as the wealth of nations work being undertaken by the World Bank. In Canada, the approach has been incorporated in several contexts, such as the efforts of the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing and the genuine progress indicators (GPI) devised by the Pembina Institute for Appropriate Development and GPI Atlantic.

As part of the national Action for Neighbourhood Change initiative, a working draft of a Neighbourhood Vitality Index was created. The Index provides a framework for establishing baseline profiles of designated neighbourhoods from a potential pool of 180 indicators. It also includes indicators that track progress on the change process itself. United Way of Canada-*Centraide Canada* is working with the Centre on Governance at the University of Ottawa and the City of Ottawa to create a network of organizations and individuals that will facilitate the sharing of practice and comparison of research findings on place-based work, including further development of the Neighbourhood Vitality Index.

The mapping of assets has emerged as a core methodology in helping to identify obvious and latent strengths embedded in individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and natural and built space. All neighbourhoods can build from a position of strength despite their struggle with tough problems. The asset-based approach sees abundance and, in this sense, is consistent with the mental health notion of resilience as a set of inner strengths. The challenge lies in finding the leaders who bring with them, and can bring out, the glass-half-full philosophy.

iv. Employing a new leadership style

With comprehensive community initiatives as a new breed of local intervention in neighbourhood revitalization, it should come as no surprise that they require a different style of leadership in order to function effectively. Articulate champions are needed to inspire support for these efforts and maintain commitment during difficult periods.

Leading these kinds of complex undertakings is neither easy nor straightforward. It involves careful judgment and skill in building consensus. The local governance structures that assume responsibility for the comprehensive community initiative explicitly convene representatives from sectors that typically do not speak the same language, let alone share the same world view or consider working together. It often takes considerable time and patience to ensure that all parties are on the same page.

Engaging in complex initiatives can be stressful, especially for the conveners of the effort. They need to combine patience for the time it takes to build vision and relationships with the pressure to achieve quick wins. They must continually seek new participants to invigorate the community process.

The multiple challenges along with the delicate balancing of diverse interests and perspectives implicit in their work mean that leaders of comprehensive efforts often need assistance, peer learning and time for renewal. Local governance structures and their respective conveners require adequate support in order to sustain their efforts over time. They can benefit from opportunities to develop their skills and expertise, especially in light of the many relationship challenges.

A new style of leadership is required to enable the effective work of local initiatives that involve diverse players trying to address multifaceted issues. This emerging leadership involves a focus on relationships – or 'leading between' [Skidmore 2004]. The leading between style differs from traditional models, which view leaders as the individuals who are vested with power and influence, and who can persuade people to follow a single or common vision. Participants in a community process effectively become the followers who look to the leaders to provide direction. Followers rarely are encouraged to recognize their own capacity to take initiative or solve problems for themselves.

The new leadership required for complex initiatives appears to lie less in decision and more in deliberation. It is not so much a question of characteristics or personality traits of individuals but rather their behaviours or what they do, especially around building trust and cultivating strong working relationships among parties to a common effort.

Finally, the new leadership involves the sharing of credit among the diverse players involved in a collaborative initiative. This sharing is often difficult when promotion and recognition are based on individual performance appraisals that typically look at quantitative criteria, such as number of

publications or projects, level of sales or contract revenue. Funders can effect change by encouraging – or even requiring – broader recognition of those involved in joint work.

Another barrier to collaboration is the age-old problem of turf war – the fact that recognition usually is accorded to an individual or department within an organization rather than a cross-cutting team effort. This is especially true of governments, which are organized along vertical lines rather than in horizontal clusters. The new leadership style taking hold within comprehensive community initiatives may go some way to address the problem. It is a style based on mutual support and shared credit for achievements among all involved parties.

One way to reduce turf war is to compel collaboration as part of the performance expectation. The UK government, for example, explicitly requires what it calls 'joined-up' work around social exclusion and neighbourhood renewal. This approach is described more fully in the associated paper on *The Enabling Environment for Community Work*. Of course, compelling any type of behaviour will not necessarily reduce interpersonal tensions. These will always exist and their mediation requires a different form of relationship building.

It is also of interest that a new type of turf war actually has appeared on the horizon. In some communities, several different organizations have taken it upon themselves to assume the role of convener. They have created their own comprehensive initiative. In fact, one city recently counted 17 of these processes.

The good news is the recognition of the need for local governance structures to address complex issues. The problem is the time and resources going into planning, possibly at the expense of local action. In fact, multiple structures inadvertently may be creating a new form of fragmentation and duplication – albeit a more sophisticated and complex one than in the past. Relationship tensions quickly bubble to the surface under these circumstances.

There are other challenges embedded in comprehensive initiatives that leaders must address. A real constraint, for example, is the demand on time, energy and resources. The supports required for multifaceted, community-based initiatives – even though they may be relatively abundant when assets are broadly included in the mix – are always stretched to the limit. Local efforts realistically can achieve only so much. They struggle continually to find a balance between broad definition of the issue and relatively targeted strategies to tackle its various elements.

Comprehensive initiatives like the ones focused on neighbourhood revitalization typically articulate overall goals within a long-term vision. While these objectives are crucial for charting the scope of the work, they must be balanced by shorter-term targets and concrete actions that provide tangible evidence of progress. Interim goals can help generate the momentum to sustain participation and attract additional partners. The challenge for communities is to find the right combination of strategic vision and specific action.

It is possible that a neighbourhood has already rallied around a concern, such as employment opportunities, settlement of new Canadians or racial tolerance. In this case, it may decide to work on the broader set of issues one step at a time – by focusing first upon areas around which it can claim victory. The importance of achieving quick wins as part of long-term comprehensive processes should not be underestimated. The successes help keep people at the table when they see that their efforts have borne fruit.

In order to sustain momentum, comprehensive initiatives must pursue issues and concerns that resonate with the lived reality of local residents. At the same time, these efforts must maintain a longer-term, strategic vision so as not to be overwhelmed by the multiple facets of the concerns that brought them together in the first place.

One way to keep going in the face of complex problems is to recognize, celebrate and harness, as earlier discussed, the assets that comprise the wealth of every community. Harnessing assets moves beyond their mere recognition. It involves unleashing their potential by enabling new combinations that lead to innovative solutions. The challenge is to determine how to capture this rich set of assets – whether singly or in combination through novel forms of collaboration.

But while collaboration is at the heart of working in the shared space, it is not always the most suitable route. It may be preferable for a single group or organization to tackle the issue on its own. It is important to acknowledge that collaboration is not for everyone – and not for all occasions. Decisions often must be made as to when and where this type of work is not appropriate or best suited to the challenge.

Many organizations have a difficult time working collaboratively because they have been stripped of adequate resources. They lack sufficient funds to carry out their own mandate let alone spend time with colleagues on broader areas of joint intervention. While it is true that the sum is usually greater than the parts, the individual components still need to be strong and healthy.

Another challenge that is simmering in parts of the country is the proliferation of organizations that wish to play a convening role in bringing together key players to tackle complex issues. Competition used to take the form of single organizations going up against each other for scarce dollars. The new rivalry is even more complex. In some communities, comprehensive initiatives are opposing each other in search of attention and support. Practitioners are starting to raise concerns about a new set of 'horizontal silos.'

The problem stems partly from systems in which funding practices continue to pit organizations against each other. They still must compete for scarce dollars – only this time they apply in groups as collaborative efforts rather than as single organizations. Both governments and other funders, whether United Ways, community foundations or private funders, must look seriously at the role they play in creating this unfriendly environment. They themselves operate in competitive mode and have just recently started to break new ground in terms of collaborative funding.

Of course, it is the responsibility not only of funders to change the broader landscape. The fact that all organizations function in an economy rooted in competitive practice does not make easy the culture shift required to support collaborative work.

It is also a culture shift that values the role of citizen voices and that makes a place for them at decision-making tables. The emerging communities agenda deals fundamentally with the sharing of power – through access to information, distributed resources and links to policy-makers. The inherent power shift raises questions about the respective roles of local government and local governance – far more profound than the mere four-letter difference would imply.

The new approaches to community interventions, and to neighbourhood renewal more specifically, require an environment that enables this emerging form of complex work. The communities agenda speaks to a new respect for and engagement of neighbourhood residents – especially for those who have lived for too long on its margins. It also implies a deep hope for a better future, which begins by ensuring that the residents of so-called 'vulnerable' neighbourhoods are at the forefront of this positive change.

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