



Final Reflections from the Action for Neighbourhood Change Research Project

Cheryl Gorman

June 2007



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by

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Table of Contents

The Action for Neighbourhood Change Project	1
Highlights of achievement	2
People legacy	2
Product legacy	4
Process legacy	5
Investment leveraged	6
Summary of the key learning from ANC experience	7
Asset-based, resident-led neighbourhood development	7
i. An example from Spryfield	8
ii. Learning from the ANC project	8
Do it yourself doesn't mean do it alone	9
i. An example from Bridgeview	9
ii. Learning from the ANC project	9
Community development skills and expertise	10
i. An example from Scarborough Village	10
ii. Learning from the ANC project	11
Making an impact, measuring change	11
i. An example from Simpson-Ogden	12
ii. Learning from ANC project	12
Collaborative action learning	13
i. Examples from national partners	14
ii. Learning from the ANC project	14
Sustainability	14
i. An example from North Central and the Core	15
ii. Learning from the ANC project	15
Suggestions for future work	16
From residents to residents	16
From local United Ways to other local organizations working as bridge builders	16
From public servants to public servants	17
From national partners to themselves and other community agenda stakeholders	18
For all	18
Take time to celebrate	18

Endnote	19
References	19
Appendix 1: Roadmap for the project tools and resources	20
Appendix 2: Future research questions	23

The Action for Neighbourhood Change Project

Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) began as a national action research project in February 2005 to explore resident-led neighbourhood development. The project aimed to better understand two interrelated aspects of the neighbourhood strengthening process: 1) building capacity of individuals, families and neighbourhoods; and 2) enhancing the responsiveness of government to neighbourhood concerns. With financial support from five federal government partners and four national partners, five neighbourhoods stepped forward to work in partnership with their local United Way: Bridgeview (Surrey); North Central, phase one, and The Core, added in phase two (Regina); Simpson-Ogden (Thunder Bay); Scarborough Village (Toronto); and Spryfield (Halifax).¹

What has distinguished ANC from other Canadian neighbourhood initiatives is the degree to which the principle of resident-led change was embedded in all activity and decision-making, and the commitment that was made by all participants to do, reflect, learn, course correct and share.

In the first phase of the project (February 2005 to March 2006), neighbourhood assets were mapped, neighbourhoods selected, experienced community developers were hired, residents were engaged and mobilized, a collective vision/mission was developed and ‘early-win’ projects were initiated at the local level. Nationally, government sponsors/partners came together with project partners to explore governance, accountability and evaluation, capacity building and funding through a monthly policy dialogue and a national policy forum, and through the creation of several policy papers, community stories, coaching tools and small working groups. A national steering committee was formed and an initial theory of change was developed for neighbourhood strengthening in a Canadian context.

Using the knowledge and lessons from the first phase, project participants refined and deepened their work in phase two (April 2005 to March 2007; approval delayed with the change in government; work began in June 2006). At the local level, small project activity continued, supported through a national project pool fund. Residents worked with project staff and local United Ways to formulate transition plans for sustaining the effort after the action research project concluded. Combining the management of project pool funds with specific training, residents developed a range of new skills and confidence in their ability to facilitate change in their neighbourhoods. United Ways became heavily involved in engaging local, and in three cases, provincial government support for neighbourhood strengthening. National partners continued to design tools to support neighbourhood work, co-hosted a national symposium on neighbourhood vitality and refined their theory of change. They also began identifying support for the continuation of a learning network and exploring the potential for expanding the local neighbourhood work. Government sponsors/partners focused on finding a fit for community and neighbourhood renewal within the new Government of Canada’s priorities.

Much has been written about project progress and results, community development methodology and policy in what felt like a very short time – 26 action-packed months. This final reflection paper presents highlights of achievements, a summary of key lessons from the ANC experience by theme and suggestions for continuing this work from the perspectives of residents, local

United Ways, Government of Canada public servants and national partners. In order to give readers a roadmap for the wealth of legacy products, Appendix 1 provides an annotated list of all the ANC documents, tools and films produced. Appendix 2 is a list of future research questions raised by the neighbourhood strengthening work in this project.

Highlights of achievement

People legacy

Everyone involved in ANC has consistently commented: “This has been one of the most challenging things I have ever done AND I would do it again, with some changes.” Given the intensity of the project and the fact that there was a change in government midway through, this commitment is a significant accomplishment. Many participants reflected that they had to take big, personal and professional risks to engage in ANC due to the fact that the principle of resident-led change and the commitment to learning and course correcting meant that the path to desired results was not known at the beginning. Consequently, it was gratifying to see the ANC model included in the recommendations for support in the ground-breaking study *From restless communities to resilient places: Building a stronger future for all Canadians*, published by the External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities in June 2006.

At the final national project meeting (February 28-March 2, 2007), presentations were made from the six participating neighbourhoods. It was a proud moment for all. Residents demonstrated that faith in their leadership capacity was warranted as they spoke passionately of what they have learned, the skills they developed, their achievements and their plans for the future. Residents from two neighbourhoods in Regina shared how they are using the community organizing skills from residents in North Central to adapt and develop grassroots capacity in The Core. The presentation from Scarborough Village demonstrated a keen awareness of how to use research and statistics in making the case for neighbourhood support. Both groups of residents from Bridgeview and Thunder Bay brought smiles and laughter as they handed out Timbits and home-made cookies in recognition of their skill in organizing neighbourhood meetings and building social capital – start with food to draw people in and create a hub where they feel welcome. Residents in Spryfield shared the encouraging links being made among business owners and community activists, demonstrating that quality of life and economic well-being go hand in hand. ANC is a wonderful example of resident leadership.

Residents and site managers are quick to point out that shared leadership is expected to be more sustainable than selection of a handful of individual leaders. By focusing on shared leadership, knowledgeable individuals can step forward when their skills and availability match the identified needs. As an example, when a beating occurred in Scarborough Village, a group of women residents organized the neighbourhood to meet with the local city councillor. From this meeting, the city conducted a safety audit and is now making improvements in physical infrastructure, such as appropriate lighting. Not only was a partial solution achieved, these women demonstrated significant

leadership and role modelling as they previously had limited public presence in the neighbourhood. In Bridgeview, three residents have won seats on the local community association board of directors and will use their positions to bring an unheard voice to decisions that affect the neighbourhood. In each site, 30 to 35 residents have committed to ongoing, shared leadership within their neighbourhoods.

Community engagement was an essential component of ANC. In addition to resident leadership, a wide range of individuals and organizations have been involved in varying degrees throughout the project. It has not been possible to track the full extent of this engagement. As residents started to take ownership of the engagement process, mini-initiatives spun off in countless directions. Many cases were not reported and were heard about anecdotally after the fact. What can be said with confidence is that thousands of people have been touched and engaged through ANC. These experiences range from one-time participation in workshops and block parties to ongoing involvement in advisory committees, policy working groups and teams set up to initiate and manage projects, such as improving access to subsidized child care spaces. The shift in power to residents is a significant indicator of ANC's success.

Shared experiences are another important people legacy as they are the foundation for building relationships and defining common language. They are at the heart of the 'shared space' process of the 'communities agenda,' two terms that are emerging in the Canadian practice of place-based development work [Torjman 2006]. It is difficult to capture the range and impact of shared experiences in a few paragraphs. The following examples illustrate the richness of these shared experiences:

- A pool of funds was targeted for each of the six neighbourhoods to establish projects submitted by residents and local groups. This process developed leadership and organizational skills in the residents who oversaw the grant process, brought residents closer together to talk about things they wanted and provided tangible improvements in the neighbourhood's physical, social/cultural and economic assets. A good example is the community garden established in Spryfield. Using ANC grants and donated staff and material, a fresh and economical food source was attained for the neighbourhood. Equally important were the social and physical assets: 57 neighbourhood children had a positive 'play' activity that led to research at the school library for gardening information (literacy) and increased self-esteem as they shared the food they grew (determinant of health); teenagers informally protected the area from vandalism (security); the Metropolitan Regional Housing Authority repaired an adjacent playground; and the Chebucto Community Health Board committed funds to pay for a garden coordinator for 2007.
- In October 2005, ANC hosted a Policy Forum for 160 participants to explore ways in which government can work more effectively to assist local neighbourhoods in their efforts to grapple with complex local problems. Government sponsors and partners were inspired by the day of presentations with selected experts from the UK, US, Australia, Holland and Canada. As a result, an informal 'federal family' network was created to link public

servants interested in the communities agenda and to explore how to increase government capacity for supporting this neighbourhood and community work.

- The individual United Ways and United Way of Canada – *Centraide Canada* have indicated that their ANC experience has significantly contributed to each organization's capacity to achieve their community impact mission. Individual United Ways have enhanced their internal community development competencies. They are actively embedding this learning into community capacity building plans for the United Way – *Centraide* Movement, a potentially powerful and long-term impact on neighbourhood well-being beyond the life of the ANC project.
- Participation in monthly policy dialogues led to the development of a neighbourhood strengthening theory of change. This theory was later expanded and a draft Neighbourhood Vitality Index was created for a Canadian context. A national symposium was held in March 2007 and resulted in a commitment in principle to form a National Neighbourhoods Network that will facilitate sharing experience and comparing research findings on place-based neighbourhood work. A volunteer steering committee was established to advance the initiative. This work has the potential to improve the practice of neighbourhood work across the country.
- Films made in this project are part of all three legacy groups: people, product and process. Under the leadership of the National Film Board, neighbourhood residents were taught the basics of film-making skills which proved to be a powerful new way for them to have their voices heard. Youth, in particular, found this experience very exciting and their new skills helped them gain self-confidence. In this project, there appeared to be a higher level of energy and interest in the audience when residents speak with the audience directly and in person. When it has not been possible to have residents as part of a presentation team, resident-made films and those created by the National Film Board were employed effectively to bring resident voices into the room. In addition, residents have used the films to engage stakeholders in their local community by demonstrating that neighbourhood strengthening is important across the country.

Product legacy

A wealth of tools, papers, stories and films has been created through ANC that are widely applicable to other projects and communities. These products are useful individually; collectively, they represent some of the best thinking about neighbourhood strengthening in Canada. An annotated description of each product is provided in Appendix 1.

The collection comprises: four community development how-to tools for practitioners; ten public policy papers that discuss issues related to neighbourhood strengthening in general and specific

policy topics such as housing; 15 community stories that document progress at the site level; an applied theory paper that integrates three individual frameworks for identifying and measuring neighbourhood change; two short films and 13 film clips that range from neighbourhood stories to an overview of the project; four recorded tele-learning sessions for community development practitioners and government program and policy staff; a response to the Auditor General of Canada's 2005 Annual Report (chapter on 'horizontal management' of government); 16 project e-newsletters; and a bilingual website. As a result of this work:

- placed-based practitioners and supporters have tools that refine our common language and are relevant in a Canadian context
- practitioners will be assisted in their continuing efforts to improve the practice of and demonstrate the importance of place-based renewal work
- detailed qualitative and quantitative evidence of impact from investing in asset-based, resident-led neighbourhood revitalization is available for engaging key stakeholders
- researchers have questions to guide future research.

Process legacy

Governance is one of the most challenging aspects of both collaborative community initiatives and horizontal or 'joined up' government. ANC has achieved important progress in both environments.

At the site level, each of the five United Ways has approached governance in different ways that respect and build on existing infrastructure. Identifying and trying to engage a neighbourhood 'system of support' – agencies, government departments, schools, businesses and community groups – was an important ANC objective. In addition, each of the six neighbourhoods developed distinct models for resident-led governance. That said, any change in one part of a system affects all other parts of the system, and this often led to tension. Details in the three sets of community stories document the challenges and the processes used in each city to lead and manage change in a complex environment. While each site shared common community development principles, the actual processes had to be customized to the local context. These models will be an important resource for other communities interested in neighbourhood strengthening.

Within the national partnership, the governance model was informal and adjusted several times as the needs of the project shifted. One of the most challenging aspects for government has been the dual and sometimes conflicting roles of sponsor and learning partner. The potential to leave one role unfulfilled was avoided for the most part because of the skill and commitment of the individual public servants who sat on the steering committee. A significant lesson from the ANC steering committee experience is the need to create written terms of reference for the oversight body. This lesson should inform future actions of participants.

One of ANC's important milestones and achievements was the fact that five participating federal government departments were able to creatively use internal funding mechanisms to develop two, rather than five, contribution agreements for the project and a single reporting and evaluation format. This integration was achieved by not taking 'no' for an initial answer. Internally, public servants were told that this arrangement could not be done. Externally, national partners pushed back on terms in the draft contribution agreement. This achievement anticipated one of the strong recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Grants and Contributions to simplify the administration of agreements. It is hoped that this approach will continue to be used by government for future comprehensive community initiatives.

In addition to enhancing governance processes, ANC also achieved significant improvements in modernizing community development approaches that fit a Canadian context. The ANC products describe how community development techniques from the 1970s have been updated to reflect the current emphasis on asset-based, resident-led development. Securing second phase funding was a significant achievement, considering that it happened *after a change in government* with only the results of community engagement and mobilizing rather than the more traditional results of program outputs – strong evidence that this asset-based, resident-led development approach was recognized and valued.

Specific guidelines for processes and accompanying measurement tools can be found in the community development tools and the integrated framework, *Rebuilding Neighbourhoods: A Neighbourhood Vitality Framework*.

Investment leveraged

As mentioned in the people legacy, it has been difficult to track comprehensively the financial and in-kind resources that have been leveraged with the federal government's investment. As people became aware of ANC, they began to engage in supporting the neighbourhoods in myriad ways. In most instances, this investment went into the neighbourhoods rather than to United Ways directly. The following examples illustrate the type of investments:

- At the municipal level, financial and in-kind investment occurred. The City Council of Thunder Bay allocated \$75,000 for neighbourhood work in 2007. City governments in Surrey, Regina and Toronto loaned and cost-shared city staff that were then assigned to the project. Other in-kind support included Geographic Information System mapping of neighbourhood assets (City of Regina), retrofitting baseball fields to cricket pitches (City of Toronto) and shared business development planning (Greater Halifax Partnership and Spryfield Business Commission). In many cases, projects initiated by ANC through the national pool of funds were supplemented by donated materials from local business owners. For example, the \$18,000 invested in Bridgeview's walking path was matched by

an additional \$57,000 in supplies and cash. In Bridgeview and Scarborough Village, local agencies coordinated or enhanced their service delivery at the request of residents in those neighbourhoods.

- In four of five sites, local United Way boards are investing money in ongoing neighbourhood work. The longest commitment is the \$150,000 per year for five years committed by the United Way of Halifax Region. This is significant for an organization that traditionally commits to one-year funding. The United Way of Greater Toronto (UWGT) successfully launched a campaign to raise funds for an expansion of ANC. Its first investor contributed \$1 million, which enabled United Way to introduce ANC in four additional neighbourhoods in 2006. By 2008, UWGT expects to be in all 13 neighbourhoods identified by the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force as needing ANC-type support.
- In two instances, provincial governments have invested as a direct result of advocacy work stemming from ANC. The Government of Ontario has allocated funds for the creation of health care hubs in some of the ANC neighbourhoods. The Government of British Columbia has chosen Bridgeview as the site for its first early literacy centre – a tribute to the tri-level government Friends of Bridgeview committee.

Having provided highlights of ANC's achievements, we turn now to the project's key lessons organized by theme.

Summary of the key lessons from ANC experience

These lessons are drawn from the project's entire knowledge base of reports, products and final reflection sessions held in each site with individual national partners and with the steering committee. The categories are a blend of the priorities from four national reflection sessions held in September 2005, February and October 2006, and March 2007. Additional learning can be found in the community stories and policy papers.

Asset-based, resident-led neighbourhood development

Commitment to this principle has been at the core of ANC's design. There are three intertwined qualities embedded in this principle. First, all neighbourhoods have individual and collective assets that can be strengthened and enhanced. Second, resident engagement is integral to the process and outcome of interventions. Sustainable progress toward neighbourhood vitality requires that issues chosen for intervention be resident-led. Finally, place-based development reflects a growing understanding that local settings present unique factors which interact in a complex way to generate positive effects – like innovation and resilience as well as negative effects, such as poverty.

i. An example from Spryfield

United Way Halifax Region organizers made an early decision to hire four neighbourhood residents as project staff. This choice helped ANC gain credibility and trust among residents and provided an ongoing reality check to ensure that decisions continued to be resident-led. Supporting resident priorities has put United Way Halifax Region into conflict with some traditional leaders in the community, such as institutions and politicians. Considerable care and attention were required to use this conflict as an opportunity to begin reshaping those relationships so that they are stronger and aligned with the resident-led principle.

ii. Learning from the ANC project

- Residents bring valuable assets in the form of relationships, knowledge of the neighbourhood and social capital. Many residents are skilled in community organizing and communication, and have a passion for making a difference in their neighbourhood.
- Residents require skills training, especially in organizing meetings, conflict resolution, communication, community animation and leadership. Learning circles and opportunities to network informally with resident leaders in other communities are very beneficial.
- Early use of small action grants is an excellent investment. Residents gain organization and leadership skills in administering the grants and tangible improvements in neighbourhood assets inspire hope. This is a quick-win intervention.
- New resident strength and structures will create potentially divisive conflict with existing organizations. Changes introduced to the neighbourhood through ANC's presence have not been perceived positively by all.
- Eighteen months is the minimum time required to achieve a new resident-led neighbourhood governance structure. Building this base is an essential starting point. Results relating to the sponsoring departments' specific mandates, such as literacy and homelessness, have naturally flowed from the projects initiated by residents in the second year of ANC.
- Linkages between resident priorities and funder mandates need to be better communicated in the short term to assist sponsors in being accountable for their investment. For example, how does organizing garbage clean-up lead to outcomes in which funders are interested?
- When inevitable tensions between residents' and funders' needs arise, priority must be given to the residents.

- Strong support from a bridging organization like United Way is essential in the start-up phase before residents are engaged and ready to lead.

Do it yourself doesn't mean do it alone

This perspective is based on the understanding that a neighbourhood is a complex system embedded in a wider complex system. Organizations that serve and support neighbourhoods have been collectively referred to in this project as a 'system of support' and can include nonprofit organizations, government at all levels, community-based organizations, educational and health institutions, and businesses. Their resources make it possible to broaden and extend work initiated at the neighbourhood level, and they often control policies that influence neighbourhood assets. Local United Ways have been referred to as 'bridging institutions' because they act as intermediaries among residents and the system of support while residents are mobilizing and becoming organized.

i. An example from Bridgeview

Developing their system of support was one of the very first steps taken by the United Way of Lower Mainland. A group of 40 government and agency representatives was originally gathered to help select the ANC neighbourhood in Surrey. This group evolved into Friends of Bridgeview and their involvement brought significant new resources to the neighbourhood. For example, Bridgeview Elementary School was selected as the site for the provincial government's early literacy pilot project as a result of groundwork done by ANC.

ii. Learning from the ANC project

- Relationships with municipal government have become increasingly important as residents and United Ways looked for support to continue neighbourhood work. Although experience has been uneven across the country, all sites indicate that forging strong relationships with municipal government is essential for long-term success.
- Given that there are layers upon layers of relationships, change in one part of a system affects all other parts of the system, often resulting in tension.
- The complexity of neighbourhood work is challenging organizations to revisit their traditional roles and ways of working. United Ways and government participants emphasized the huge cultural shift this work requires if it is to be done well. In particular, United Ways expressed the importance of being comfortable with paradoxes, such as

taking an advocacy role at the same time as ‘holding space’ in a nonpartisan manner for the community to work through its conflicts. Public servants commented about the paradox of being a sponsor (requiring distance for accountability purposes) and a learning partner (requiring closeness for collaboration). It is easy to retreat when conflict surfaces if work has not been done to prepare senior leaders, volunteers and staff.

- Clearly written roles and responsibilities will enhance the effectiveness of partnerships and prevent misunderstandings and unmet expectations down the road. Authority, power, ownership and decision-making principles should be documented and revisited at major transition points.
- The concept of a communities agenda is gathering momentum among informal and growing networks. Experience with the Neighbourhood Vitality Symposium suggests that there is a window of opportunity to more effectively share knowledge and resources regarding place-based work.

Community development skills and expertise

Community development is the process of cultivating a broad network of interaction in order to enable communities to achieve a sustainable, healthy economy and improved quality of life. Current models emphasize an asset-based approach.

i. An example from Scarborough Village

This site demonstrates what can be achieved when skilled community developers work with and train residents. United Way of Greater Toronto hired Public Interest Strategy and Communications, Inc., an organization with a proven team of community developers who continued to search for innovative practices that expanded their already substantial repertoire. After extensive individual conversations and group meetings, this team identified and trained community animators – residents with established trust and networks within a particular cultural, age or linguistic group. These community animators became a crucial communication conduit for ANC. An important result is the creation of Scarborough Village’s first service agency hub that is now more effectively delivering services where and how they are most needed by residents.

ii. Learning from the ANC project

- Fundamentally, this work requires a shift in mindset. While traditional management practices are still relevant, new approaches that reflect the unpredictable and evolving nature of this work are also needed. This is a significant culture shift for most organizations trying to facilitate community change.
- The skills required to manage relationships must become more sophisticated. Results can be achieved in the short term in the absence of strong relationships, but results over time require healthy relationships.
- Engaging and mobilizing residents in a diverse neighbourhood are specialized skills. Diversity must be viewed and used as an asset. A deep understanding of tools, processes and interventions is needed along with sensitivity to know which ones might apply in a given situation. General stages are experienced in each community but this is rarely a linear process and the ‘chunking and sequencing’ of action is specific to each community. The same principles hold true for engaging and mobilizing the system of support.
- Change leadership skills and knowledge are essential.
- New approaches to learning are needed. Partners must take time to continuously do-reflect-learn-course correct. These stages have implications for research and evaluation.
- New styles and means of communication are required to share ideas simply and effectively to diverse audiences.
- It is increasingly important to learn from related areas of expertise, such as economic development and broad community collaboration.

Making an impact and measuring change

Promising work has been done in the past decade to blend qualitative and quantitative methods for measuring results. At the same time, there has been groundbreaking work to capture and measure community outcomes as well as program outputs. The complexity of strengthening neighbourhoods does not lend itself to linear, cause and effect research that uses control groups to test and confirm hypotheses. The tension in the research community at large was also reflected within ANC. Government sponsors understandably looked for quantitative changes in individual well-being while community developers knew that it would take one to two years to engage and mobilize residents. Government sponsors worked hard with the other partners to develop an evaluation approach that would demonstrate appropriate accountability while allowing those working in the neighbourhood to have the flexibility needed to respond to changing circumstances.

i. An example from Simpson-Ogden

Warmly referred to as “the little engine that could,” Simpson-Ogden has been an important example of how much progress can be made with a targeted investment and strong leadership. When ANC began, there was limited understanding about what neighbourhood strengthening looked like from the perspective of United Way Thunder Bay; the organization was also unsure whether it had the capacity and commitment to do this work well. Results in the neighbourhood quickly demonstrated why this effort was worthwhile and sparked the desire to sustain it. At the neighbourhood level, a newly-created neighbourhood association is setting itself up as a registered nonprofit organization. United Way Thunder Bay has committed two percent (\$40,000) of its 2006 campaign to Simpson-Ogden and the project has secured financial support from Thunder Bay City Council (\$75,000) and the Ontario Trillium Foundation (\$74,000) for neighbourhood strengthening.

ii. Learning from the ANC project

- There have been remarkable achievements that were highlighted earlier in this paper. Of particular note for this theme is the contribution made by the Neighbourhood Vitality Index to the body of knowledge for place-based measurement and evaluation of neighbourhood assets and change variables.
- Action grant projects provided quick and important ‘proof points’ of change and impact. They captured the interest of potential supporters. Government sponsors/partners and practitioners need to continue exploring how to better package raw results of these projects into language and formats that can be used for accountability purposes.
- Despite these achievements, there is still a significant gap in expectations regarding evaluation. Due to internal system barriers, some government sponsors/partners are not in a position to accept process measures or those unrelated to their departmental mandate as legitimate short-term evaluation results.
- Time played a significant role in the results of this project. There were two key time factors: 1) The clear message in February 2005 that although the project had originally been conceived as a three-year initiative, only 14 months of funding was confirmed; and 2) The two-month time lag between phase one and two created uncertainty about whether the contribution agreement would be extended. These factors imposed a sense of urgency that had both positive and negative effects. Momentum was generated that allowed participants to break through barriers that a more reasonably paced project might not have been able to accomplish. However, the intense pace also meant that some of the project’s ambiguities did not get resolved at the outset. For instance, some partners believed strongly that a theory of change would help guide decision-making while others felt the complex nature of the work required a more emergent approach. It is not possible to

know what impact the resolution of this conflict might have had. One can hypothesize that resolution might have decreased the reporting burden at the site level with a more clear sense of what data was needed. In addition, the length of phase one and the uncertainty about extension meant that considerable resources were spent on renewing and sustaining the work before it had hardly begun. It is reasonable to suggest that project results might have increased if those resources had been directed to the project goals. Finally, time from the perspective of mismatched planning cycles contributed to the gap in expectations about evaluation and accountability. United Way boards of directors generally have two-year terms and plan annual funding campaigns. Governments are often restricted to one-year contribution agreements. Community developers know it takes approximately 18 months to engage and mobilize residents.

- The results-based accountability framework logic model created in June 2005 was useful for the external evaluations. Partners felt the need to supplement this model with a neighbourhood strengthening theory of change at the end of phase one in order to capture the dynamic nature of the work and to introduce qualitative measures of success. The quantitative and qualitative measures were subsequently blended and enhanced in the *Rebuilding Neighbourhoods: A Neighbourhood Vitality Framework* that was developed at the end of phase two.
- There are multiple levels and types of accountability. Commitment to the principle of resident-led neighbourhood development means that accountability to residents must be the first lens for making decisions.
- This project has excelled at doing-reflecting-learning-course correcting at the site level. As a result, resources have been maximized and applied to the areas that could make the greatest difference.

Collaborative action learning

ANC was designed as an action research project to better understand two interrelated aspects of the neighbourhood strengthening process: 1) building capacity of individuals, families and neighbourhoods; and 2) enhancing the responsiveness of government to neighbourhood concerns. Partners began with a base of common interests and ideas as well as an agreement to learn together. The commitment to be intentional and document our do-reflect-learn-course correct cycles has been an integral component of the project.

i. Examples from national partners

The ANC experience created a shared and ongoing community impact experience for the participating United Ways that has shaped thinking about what is possible within the entire United Way – *Centraide* Movement. Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement and Caledon Institute of Social Policy are also partners in Vibrant Communities and are using their experience in both projects to gain a deeper understanding of how to connect and sustain community and neighbourhood development. The informal ‘federal family’ of public servants is a practical way to create a safe place for exploring how government can be more responsive to community and neighbourhood needs.

ii. Learning from the ANC project

- Care and attention to creating a safe place to learn was essential to the quality of our shared learning. Open and honest conversations about difficult topics occurred when trust had been built by paying attention to relationships.
- Coming together in person at key transition points was important to supplement communication by phone and email. There will always be tension between site and system needs, and in-person meetings provided an opportunity to find common directions and solve problems collaboratively. Informal networks emerged that will outlast the project.
- Ironically, government sponsors/partners engaged in this learning ‘off the corner of their desks.’ Inadequate time and resources extended to managing the internal horizontal relationships. As a consequence, limited progress was made on the second action research focus of enhancing government responsiveness. It was disappointing that the learning through the policy dialogue in phase one was not applied in phase two.
- Staff turnover is a reality for all partners. It is important to have a repository for documents to assist new people in familiarizing themselves with the project. Creating a more robust buddy system would have helped as well.
- Having the opportunity to compare experiences across the country allowed trends and patterns to surface that would have been invisible had each site attempted to learn on its own. In addition, partners were able to improve their own understanding and techniques.

Sustainability

Not surprisingly, sustainability became a critical issue in phase two of the project. However, sustainability meant different things to different people. Caution was expressed about becoming

attached to a particular organizational structure, noting that funding streams come and go. What is important is the continuous improvement of the neighbourhood's assets, however that is achieved. Strong statements were made that ANC has provided a robust framework and that it is necessary to 'hold space' to give resident leadership time to strengthen and take root.

i. An example from North Central and The Core

Regina experienced ANC quite differently than the other sites. It had a pre-existing system of support structure, the Regina Inner City Community Partnership (RICCP), which had been active in North Central for a few years prior to the launch of ANC. Regina's initial neighbourhood, North Central, was pre-selected for participation. United Way of Regina, with advice and support from RICCP, decided to switch neighbourhoods to The Core in the second phase of ANC. The City of Regina has a formalized structure of incorporated community associations and has funded a staff person in several of the inner-city associations for many years. While the other sites are trying to use the ANC model in continued neighbourhood renewal efforts, Regina is employing its pre-ANC and ANC experience to explore a new model that will make sense for the City. Regina provides a contrast to other sites that has not been fully mined for learning and is an important reminder that one size does not fit all, including for sustainability.

ii. Learning from the ANC project

- As noted, the length of phase one and the uncertainty about extension meant that substantial resources were spent on renewing and sustaining the work before it had really begun. This investment was viewed by partners as a significant lost opportunity, particularly at the national project office which retained only one of the original four staff members in the transition.
- Neighbourhoods will continue to need a system of support. Many factors outside of local control influence local assets. Canada faces serious challenges because of its current inability to support community-level change in a systemic way.
- The relationship with municipal government emerged as a critical success factor for sustainability, regardless of the structure or form neighbourhood work takes.
- The ANC asset-based, resident-led model demonstrated that residents can and will lead neighbourhood change given sufficient assistance from external systems. With the exception of Regina, United Ways in the other four sites are committed for at least the next year to maintain direct involvement in neighbourhood work and will support the current ANC neighbourhood in their city.

- Residents were working for positive change in their neighbourhoods before ANC and will continue to do so in the months and years ahead. Through ANC, they have acquired new skills and confidence in creating hope by doing simple, visible things. Residents recognized the importance of ANC investment in catalyzing neighbourhood leadership for change.

Suggestions for future work

As this phase of ANC drew to a close, sites and national partners held reflection sessions to capture key learning and ideas that they believe are transferable to other neighbourhood initiatives. Partners were asked to provide advice they thought would be helpful to someone in their circumstances. As an example, residents were asked what they would want residents in other neighbourhoods to know. In the spirit of collaboration, these ideas are offered here.

From residents to residents

A series of simple, visible actions are powerful and create momentum. If you do not have a community gathering place, create one where all feel welcome – food and humour go a long way. Train successors – if you have a Trash Queen for neighbourhood clean-up days, make sure there is a Trash Princess and Prince. Build relationships – start with those who are ready; collaborate with other neighbourhoods in your community, especially to talk with local government. Work with an organization like United Way to establish and improve relationships with service providers and find organizations that can help with research to explain why investment in your neighbourhood is a good idea. Get politically active and engage local media. Improvize and use your existing strengths!

From local United Ways to other local organizations working as bridge builders

Ask permission to walk alongside residents in the direction they choose rather than consulting with residents. Build from strengths and focus on assets – pay attention to the subtle and not so subtle ways language can reinforce a deficit-based perspective. Find different means of encouraging the full range of ‘voices’ to be heard. For example, making films is an important tool for enabling people to express themselves.

Involve the senior leaders of the organization from the outset. Engage experienced community developers with an asset-based philosophy and commit to building organizational and community capacity for this competency. Neighbourhood work can increase internal alignment within the organization. However, be prepared for your advocacy and conflict resolution role as this work generates tension when power shifts in the neighbourhood and community. Understand power

structures and the opportunity that conflict can provide for innovation and growth. All of these factors mean: engage in dialogue about the potential benefits and risks, assess readiness to commit to this work and then jump in with both feet.

Collaboration with like-minded organizations adds significant value. It takes 12 to 18 months to create a new collaborative governance structure. Establishing a strong and supportive relationship with municipal government is key. Build in time to reflect, and learn locally and with bridge builders in other communities – probe for similarities and differences. Embed the shared learning more deeply within individual organizations and stay connected!

From public servants to public servants

ANC reaffirmed why we became public servants. Participation in collaborative community initiatives requires a personal risk because the current government culture does not yet adequately support this work. The risk is worth taking.

In addition to learning with the community, create safe places within government to continue learning. Explore how to overcome barriers within government mechanisms for horizontal management. Learn more about the roles government could and should be taking in communities and identify cross-cutting objectives. For example, what does prevention look like department by department? Recognize that learning has responsibility – asking hard questions creates an expectation that something will be done with the answers.

Understand that when entering into third-party agreements to do neighbourhood/community work, there is a natural tendency for government to disengage. Find creative ways to maintain strong interest and presence when government is not in the driver's seat. Create a government sponsor/partner-only group with a clear mandate that includes a policy and program focus. Write common briefing notes and fact sheets for horizontal initiatives. Be more intentional about structure and reflect that intentionality in interdepartmental Memoranda of Understanding. Find better ways to engage with regional staff at the community level and educate community partners about what government can and cannot do. Build in succession planning and a 'buddy system' for the inevitable personnel transfers – this action will help maintain trust and relationships with external partners.

Use the 'positive buzz' associated with initiatives like ANC to engage senior bureaucrats. Help them gain a deeper understanding of what this work entails so that they can advocate for internal system change. Work with central agencies to overcome systemic barriers that make it difficult for government to support community-driven processes. Find ways to use more effectively government's research and data collection/analysis capacity.

Note: Several of these points are echoed in the policy dialogue reflection paper crafted by all the project partners at the end of phase one.

From national partners to themselves and other community agenda stakeholders

For national partners, take time to stop and reflect at this transition point. How will each organization use the shared learning from the ANC experience to do its work differently? In particular, how will the United Way – *Centraide* Movement build from this experience to achieve its community impact mission across the country and are its structures and resources able to effectively support community building and neighbourhood strengthening work? Moreover, how will Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement and the Caledon Institute bridge ANC and Vibrant Communities work?

Partners need to strengthen links among community agenda stakeholders at senior leadership and practitioner levels. Create and enhance a range of formal and informal networks, such as the emerging National Neighbourhood Network, to advocate for and improve the practice of place-based work. Secure resources for this work and ensure that formal networks and partnerships have written terms of reference with clearly identified roles and responsibilities. Explore willingness to lead a major campaign for a national neighbourhood strategy and public policies that will result in government mechanisms and investment that support comprehensive community initiatives. Concentrate initially on municipal stakeholders and gaining cost-effective access to national statistics and research.

For all

It cannot be emphasized enough that strong relationships are essential for this work to be successful – build on existing collaborations and assets. Neighbourhood strengthening and community development require new skills and competencies by all partners. Communication must be frequent, clear and user-friendly. It is important to engage in ongoing cycles of doing-reflecting-learning-course correcting. Shared learning mitigates the risk for all partners. In the current environment, there is a fragility to this work that must be acknowledged – it often hinges on individuals who inspire others to go beyond their normal boundaries. Finally...

Take time to celebrate

Having shared an overview of project activities, achievements, learning and advice, it seems fitting to close this reflection paper with an excerpt from the last ANC newsletter describing the national celebration held to mark the end of phase two and the transition to ANC-plus:

What would a final project meeting be without a little celebration among participants? Up to this point our reflections have been gathered in thoughtful and serious meetings. Now it was time to do some right brain reflection and have some

fun at the same time. Project partners gathered in small teams to create an award that they would like to present to the ANC project as a whole. Using glitter glue, balloons, pipe cleaners and an assortment of material suitable for summer camp craft time, partners created a physical ‘trophy’ for the award ceremony. Laughter filled the room as people whipped up ANC cakes and ‘sewed’ a seat of your pants that would rival *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants*. As each award was presented, stories explaining the trophies reflected an amazing depth of learning and emotion. With the stage set for celebration, partners were presented with a package of sunflower seeds to remind them of how many seeds have been sown across the country through ANC and to encourage them to keep turning to the sun as our neighbourhood strengthening work continues. As each team member came up to receive their seeds, we paused to honour their unique contributions to the ‘art of the possible.’

Endnote

1. Federal government partners using phase one titles: from Human Resources and Social Development: National Secretariat on Homelessness, Office for Learning Technologies, and National Literacy Secretariat (phase one), as well as Canada’s Drug Strategy (Health Canada) and National Crime Prevention Strategy (Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada; phase one). Four national partners: United Way of Canada – *Centraide Canada*, Tamarack – an Institute for Community Engagement, the National Film Board of Canada (phase one) and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Local partners: United Ways in Halifax Region, Thunder Bay, Greater Toronto, Regina and Lower Mainland.

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Appendix 1: Roadmap for the project tools and resources

The following ANC products can be found on the bilingual project web site: www.anccommunity.ca

Community Development How-to tools

Community Capacity Building Planning Resources for Neighbourhood Renewal is designed to assist the staff and volunteers in implementing a community-based planning process. This tool includes a theoretical framework and resource documents for each element of the framework.

A Guide for Neighbourhood Planning describes four basic principles to enhance community renewal: multisectoral collaboration; comprehensive thinking and action; community learning and change; and community asset-building. It recognizes the importance of using the action of planning to mobilize people.

Navigating the White Waters of Evaluation provides guidance for establishing a robust accountability framework for comprehensive community initiatives.

Strengthening Relationships with Local Government looks at the many different interactions which, collectively, determine the nature of the overall relationship between a resident-led, community-based initiative and local government. It also makes practical suggestions for ways to improve those interactions and to strengthen relationships.

Policy Papers

ANC Sketches: Building a Neighbourhood Renewal Process updates the project's theory of change and maps 11 neighbourhood projects onto the theory. Results, project impact and implications for future action are provided.

Asset-based, Resident-led Neighbourhood Development presents insights derived from the initiative's first 14 months of operation. It highlights the asset-based, resident-led approach pursued in the five participating neighbourhoods and considers the roles that government and voluntary sector partners at the national level can play in support of such initiatives.

Government and Communities: Strengthening Neighbourhoods Together describes the policy dialogue process that was used to build an operational framework among governments and communities. Results, lessons learned and insights for future public policy are described.

Neighbourhood Change through a Housing Lens presents an overview of the processes and factors that influence neighbourhood decline. It reviews how housing policies and programs have reinforced – often inadvertently – this process of decline and identifies how proactive, purposefully designed housing policies can effectively foster neighbourhood regeneration.

Orienteering Over New Ground: A Neighbourhood Theory of Change describes ANC’s action learning regarding the interrelationships and role of transformational change among neighbourhoods, bridge builders and “systems of support.” Knowledge about why strong neighbourhoods matter sets the stage for a theory of change.

Policy Dialogue explores the concept of policy dialogue, reviews key lessons from practice and considers the relevance of these lessons to the ANC project. It describes this process as a tool for encouraging governments to talk with community representatives about policy as well as program and administrative issues that affect citizens and organizations.

Reading, Writing and Neighbourhood Renewal discusses recent findings on the status of literacy proficiency in Canada and describes various measures that communities can take to promote literacy.

Remaking Neighbourhood Renewal: Towards Creative Neighbourhood Renewal Policies for Britain focuses upon the policies and strategies for implementing neighbourhood renewal in England. It presents a brief review and evaluation of UK policies and practices, and proposes some lessons for Canada.

Rethinking Neighbourhood Renewal: Review of the US Experience and Possible Lessons for Canada provides a brief overview of the historic influences, early attempts and current program framework for neighbourhood renewal in the US. It discusses the mechanics of renewal strategies in that country, their effectiveness and possible lessons for Canada.

Shared Space: The Communities Agenda defines this term and develops it within the context of theories on resilience, and innovation and its application as cluster-based economic development. The paper argues that resilience in a community development context is the result of strategic actions taken in four independent but related clusters.

There’s Madness to this Method provides a project response to the Auditor General of Canada’s 2005 Annual Report, specifically with reference to the chapter on horizontality.

What is Policy? was written to support the work of community initiatives interested in policy development. It defines common terms in the public policy realm.

Community stories

Three sets of five stories were developed at the beginning, middle and end of the ANC project to document views of project participants and the neighbourhood impact achieved.

Applied theory paper

Rebuilding Neighbourhoods: A Neighbourhood Vitality Framework integrates three individual frameworks for identifying and measuring neighbourhood assets and the change process. Detailed indicators and measures are provided.

Film

Two short films are available in modular format describing ANC in each of the five sites and for the project as a whole. In addition, six film clips were created by residents.

Recorded tele-learning sessions

Ira Barbell of the Annie E. Casey Foundation: Two calls covered the foundation's neighbourhood strengthening practice including strategies for engaging stakeholders, and how to measure and communicate impact.

Anne Kubisch and Patricia Auspos of the Aspen Institute's Roundtable for Community Change: This call focused on the Institute's work to support vertical collaboration and work across neighbourhoods.

Neil Bradford of the University of Western Ontario and the Canadian Policy Research Network: The final call in the series discussed the current state of research and learning about place-based community building initiatives.

e-newsletters

Regular two-page newsletters were produced throughout the project to keep stakeholders informed of key developments.

Appendix 2: Future research questions

The following research questions have been raised throughout the course of the project. They are provided here, in random order, as a reference for future work.

From phase one:

- Collaboration is more than cooperation – it is fundamentally about sharing power. Are those who have traditionally held power ready and willing to share their power?
- Is there a way to speed up the mobilization process as you work with additional neighbourhoods within a city?
- What is necessary to create sustainable, resident-led governance structures?
- How transferable are local governance models?

From phase two:

- What will be the long-term impact from the learning and relationships which resulted from this project?
- Do interventions focused on all three categories of neighbourhood vitality increase the likelihood of a successful outcome?
- Will the business improvement activities result in growth of local businesses? Will long-term health of local businesses lead to more resident employment?
- Will residents trained as community animators see improvements in their paid work as a result of skill development? Will the neighbourhood reach a tipping point of engaged citizens such that community animators are no longer required?
- How can processes and structures be made more welcoming and relevant to youth and other groups that are not comfortable with traditional methods of engagement?
- Will youth participation in neighbourhood change efforts create positive effects in other areas of their lives (e.g., school performance)?
- What happens when champions move on?
- How do relationships build in resiliency in order to resolve tough issues?
- What happens if community structures evolve too slowly to attain self-sufficiency?
- Will having a stable resident governance group result in more projects being achieved than if the group had proceeded with a project focus?
- Can mindsets change without shared experience?
- How can the external system of support be encouraged to expand its interest and activity for all neighbourhoods in a municipality?
- What factors lead to successful engagement of the system of support?