

Vibrant Communities St. John's: Engaging Citizens and Changing Systems

Introduction

Newfoundland and Labrador is in the midst of an economic boom. Offshore oil development, new advances in ocean technologies and marine biotechnologies, and the continued health of traditional sectors such as tourism, mining and forestry have made the province Canada's fastest growing economy [Department of Business, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador nd].

St. John's (population 180,000) is reaping the greatest benefits of the economic good times. Even with a strong economy, however, some people are left behind. Neighbourhood-level data from the province's Community Accounts database and information from other sources report that several of the city's neighbourhoods are among the poorest in the province. This data presents both a challenge and rallying point for those interested in poverty reduction and community revitalization.

Vibrant Communities St. John's

As early as 2003, discussions began between Vibrant Communities and various government and community organizations in St. John's about the possibility of adding a Newfoundland and Labrador link to the national Vibrant Communities network. It was clear that a number of local initiatives shared the basic aspirations and principles being explored by Vibrant Communities groups across the country: enhancing multisectoral collaboration in order to achieve a new level of effectiveness in reducing poverty. In 2005, Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador (CSC) hosted a meeting to introduce the Vibrant Communities concept to community groups, government representatives (including the Minister of Finance) and the private sector.

By 2006, CSC [<http://www.envision.ca>] had agreed to take on the role of convening Vibrant Communities St. John's (VC St. John's). Now completing its application for Trail Builder status – a three-year designation awarded on the basis of a completed community plan – and with financial and other support from local partners and Vibrant Communities national initiative, the undertaking is about to set sail.

VC St. John's will include a 15-member Leadership Team which will develop and guide the overall work plan. VC Action Teams will contribute to specific initiatives identified in the plan, and the broader VC St. John's network of more than 100 citizens and organizations will keep the initiative grounded in the widely diverse experiences of its membership. The VC St. John's initiative will also serve as a partnership incubator and program promoter. All participants are committed to the principles of continuous learning and change. A Citizen's Voice Network of 25 people living on low income has been created as a mutual support and learning forum. Its members will pursue opportunities to raise awareness about local poverty, influence public policy and shape the decision-making processes of VC St. John's.

Understanding poverty

In preparation for launching a Vibrant Communities initiative, numerous meetings, interviews and discussions were held to arrive at a consensus on the city's barriers to individual and collective prosperity. Three large events were held in space made available by the City of St. John's. Representatives from all levels of government, the community-based sector and private business met to discuss the opportunities inherent in a Vibrant Communities approach. On the basis of these consultations, VC St. John's articulated both a general understanding of poverty and an analysis of the key factors contributing to poverty in St. John's.

Wary of exhausting energy and interest trying to develop the perfect definition of poverty, VC St. John's leadership team opted to put forward a basic working definition that captures the heart of the problem the community is trying to address. In this view, poverty is a situation in which individuals and families lack the resources needed to maintain a decent standard of living and participate fully in the life of their community.

Six key factors have been identified as contributing to the poverty situation in St. John's:

- people need improved access and support in order to complete education and skills training
- employers are not connecting to the existing, untapped labour pool
- there is a lack of affordable, high quality child care
- policy changes are needed to remove the barriers which prevent people from moving off income support
- an intergenerational cycle of poverty exists in low-income neighbourhoods
- programs and services are offered in a piecemeal fashion, rather than through an holistic, coordinated approach.

Of particular concern to VC St. John's are conditions in a series of high-poverty neighbourhoods. In 2004, the *Poverty Profile of the Northeast Avalon Region* [Government of NL and LA, 2004] identified high-risk neighbourhoods according to five indicators of vulnerability: low family income, high unemployment, incidence of reliance on income support programs, low levels of high school completion and higher numbers of lone-parent families. It is in response to the multiple and interrelated aspects of poverty in these neighbourhoods and among other high-risk groups that VC St. John's developed a multifaceted and collaborative approach to poverty reduction.

Poverty reduction is the process of ensuring that individuals and families have adequate resources to maintain a decent standard of living and participate fully in the life of the community.

Theory of change

At its core, VC St. John's is about strengthening engagement and collaboration. As Peggy Matchim, the initiative's interim coordinator, says: "The challenge is not so much knowing what needs to be done, it's about how we can make it happen. Our main concern is to initiate action – to create a lively presence and give people opportunities to engage with us and with one another in a spirit of mutual learning and support."

This type of community work is often a cart and horse proposition. VC St. John's organizers know that people are keen to be involved, but structures and programs must be built first to provide an entry point to engagement.

An early success has been the pilot testing of the "Makin' It Work" program by the Community Centre Alliance, a VC St. John's partner. Businesses in the city had expressed frustration that advertisements for well-paid entry level jobs were going unanswered. At the same time, unemployed people in low-income neighbourhoods were indicating a real desire to find meaningful employment. A partnership between a large local employer and a community-based organization resulted in 22 participants in the Makin' It Work pilot project getting on-the-job training and mentoring from local employers. At the end of one five-week and one three-week pilot project, 13 of the 22 participants moved from income support to employment.

"People often don't get excited until they see things starting to happen," says Peggy. "The success of the Makin' It Work pilot project has created a lot of interest. Several local businesses have indicated an interest in forming a similar type of partnership. The people who have secured positions have become real champions and are encouraging others to get involved."

Effective initiatives like Makin' It Work do not arise out of the blue. They are developed by people from different sectors and backgrounds listening to one another and finding ways to address their mutual interests. Opportunities need to be created for people to share their ideas and realize their ability to work together for solutions.

Recognizing this reality, VC St. John's has designed a two-pronged strategy for poverty reduction. On the one hand, it aims to connect residents who live in poverty with services and programs that can assist them develop the assets they need to improve their circumstances. On the other hand, it seeks to engage those same individuals and community partners in identifying policy and other changes needed to create a system that more effectively assists people in difficulty.

VC St. John's role is to animate and facilitate this process of action, learning and change. Raising awareness, building momentum, drawing together partners and stakeholders, and fostering dialogue are the building blocks of this community-based approach to poverty reduction.

Strategies for success

Neighbourhood development is a key aspect of VC St. John's poverty reduction efforts, and reflects the broader goal of reaching people 'where they live.' VC St. John's overarching strategy is to build connections and partnerships that will create new opportunities for people. The City of St. John's, Eastern Health (a regional health authority which extends far beyond St. John's), Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and several community groups are just a few of the partners that have already expressed interest in the neighbourhood work. Once partnerships and relationships are built and strengthened, participants can look forward to restructuring their contributions with an informed understanding of how their work meshes with and complements other efforts in the community.

Says Peggy: "Partners are excited about getting involved and making our VC initiatives and other existing programs more successful. We'll link single mothers with Makin' It Work, for example, or organize neighbourhood cleanups that demonstrate how possible it is for people to have a real impact on their surroundings."

VC St. John's wishes to distinguish its work by recognizing the totality of people's lives. A youth who needs educational support, for example, might require academic tutoring, social networks, social development experiences, financial support, mentoring and employment. VC St. John's strives to serve the whole person, not just the 20 percent that 'fits' a given program. Proponents see little value in providing youth initiatives which offer nothing to parents or which fail to recognize the problems facing the neighbourhoods in which those families live. The initiative hopes to tie such elements together and work with partners to ensure that future policy decisions are similarly responsive.

Using a tool designed by the Tamarack Institute called "Making an Impact: Screening and Selecting Opportunities for Poverty Reduction," VC St. John's has chosen six core initiatives as the

starting point for its work. Though each was selected on the basis of its individual strengths and ability to meet a community need, consideration was also given to each strategy's potential for creating cross-linkages with the other five. They include:

- *A whole community approach to increasing high school completion for youth in low-income neighbourhoods*
Taking the view that teens will more likely finish high school when supported by a web of community- and education-based initiatives, VC St. John's will work to engage youth and families in low-income neighbourhoods; build peer networks among junior high-aged youth; link teens with a range of learning opportunities and new experiences; create new neighbourhood partnerships among a range of organizations; develop a private sector youth mentoring program; and encourage all stakeholders to share and promote positive messages about education.
- *An expansion of Makin' It Work, the adult education-to-employment initiative*
As described in the previous section, the Makin' It Work initiative provides community-based job recruitment, orientation and skills preparation in conjunction with hands-on work experience. Employer partners guarantee participants an interview for living wage-paying positions upon completion of the training and work experience. Building on the success of the 2007 pilot project which moved 13 of 22 participants from income support to employment, VC St. John's hopes to nurture and support this effort so that it can become self-sustaining.
- *A policy roundtable series aimed at reducing barriers for those transitioning from income support to employment*
These dialogues will engage partners from all sectors and current or past recipients of income assistance programs to identify the barriers that make it hard for people to move from income support to employment. Participants will share and clarify information and understanding and brainstorm innovative solutions. Partners will then be encouraged to pilot test projects or implement some of the proposed responses.
- *The Citizens Voice Network*
VC St. John's will continue to support this growing network of people who live on low income. Members will share information, learn and support one another, and pursue opportunities to raise awareness and inform policy and decision making. The group will liaise with the various layers of VC St. John's organizational structure as well as other policy-makers to better inform their planning and decision-making processes. The initiative hopes to build on some best practices shared by the Community Action Team, a sub-committee of BC's Capital Region's Quality of Life CHALLENGE.
- *Networking for Vibrant Communities*
Partners wishing to work more collectively in reaching out to low-income residents at the neighbourhood level will harness existing assets to assist in building local partnerships, engagement and community spirit. Neighbourhood residents and many community partners

will be involved in planning and activities; offer capacity-building opportunities; foster relationship and partner development; and hold community events where ideas and successes are shared and celebrated.

- *An Action Team on child care*

The city's lack of affordable, high quality child care has been identified as a serious barrier to advancement and prosperity, particularly for single mothers. A group of stakeholders has identified several of the underlying issues, including the need to meet regularly, engage parents and to develop a work plan and timeline for enhancing child care options.

Is it working?

Vibrant Communities St. John's has set a target to assist at least 1,500 households in their journey out of poverty by 2012. While it recognizes Statistics Canada's low income cut-offs (LICOs) as a rough measure of poverty, it will use a more fine-tuned, multidimensional and asset-based approach to track residents' movement out of poverty. The approach is based on the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, an holistic asset-based model for poverty reduction. Sustainable Livelihoods holds that the key to sustained poverty reduction is to enable people to build a critical mass of assets in different asset areas (i.e., personal, social, human, financial and physical). Through the array of strategies it is helping to advance, VC St. John's will enable individuals and households to accumulate assets in at least four of these areas.

In addition to practical interventions that assist individuals and households in building assets, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework also promotes strategic interventions that strengthen community capacity for poverty reduction and address contextual factors, such as public policy, that may contribute to poverty. VC St. John's also has specified targets for its work in terms of community capacity development, and policy change.

These targets are summarized in the following chart. A preliminary evaluation plan has been prepared for tracking these targets and identifying lessons from the work as it evolves. This plan will be refined as VC St. John's strategies are further developed and implemented.

OVERALL OUTCOME: At least 1,500 households assisted in their journey out of poverty

1. Improved individual and household assets

Personal Assets

- 50 youth experience greater self-esteem/self-confidence
- 200 adults experience greater self-esteem/self-confidence

Social Assets

Through various community and neighbourhood activities and events, VC St. John's will:

- Engage 300 people living on low income in organizing and planning around issues of personal and community concern
- Engage 200 young people from low-income neighbourhoods in organizing and planning around issues of personal and community concern
- Engage at least 10 neighbourhood Tenants Associations in local poverty reduction efforts
- A minimum of 25 youth will experience and 100 adults from low-income neighbourhoods will experience enhanced personal/professional networks

Human Assets

- 200 adults gain employment-related skills (life and technical skills) through Makin' it Work program
- At least 50 youth gain enhanced life and academic skills

Financial Assets

- At least 100 unemployed adults make transition to living wage employment
- At least 30 unemployed youth employed in parttime work

2. Enhanced community capacity for poverty reduction

Convening Capacity

- VC St. John's Leadership Team active and functioning well
- Financial and in-kind resources as required in place to support continued work
- Engagement of staff with the range of skills necessary for this work

Multisectoral Leadership

- Leadership Team includes representation from community-based, public and private sectors as well as people living with low income

Collaboration

- At least 5 Action Teams in place, including representatives from all four sectors
- Collaborative partnerships and planning involving
 - 100 community-based organizations
 - 25 government agencies or departments
 - 20 businesses and industry associations
 - 50 people living with low income

Community Awareness

- Hold at least 8 large community events
- At least 10 success stories shared publicly (e.g., in local media, at large events, online)
- Distribute 10,000 decals

3. Changed policies and systems

Create mechanisms to improve community input in policy making including:

- Hold a minimum of 3 policy roundtable discussions related to poverty reduction per year, engaging minimum of 60 people representing all four sectors
- Develop at least 10 briefs and media releases on poverty-related items
- Maintain at least 25 regular members of Citizen's Voice
- Facilitate at least 5 Citizen's Voice meetings per year
- Coordinate at least 12 opportunities for members of Citizen's Voice to inform policy and decision makers

Community assets related to poverty reduction

- 50 families benefiting from enhanced child care opportunities
 - A strong network of at least 50 parents informed and engaged around this issue
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Learning questions to be explored

Members of the VC St. John's initiative believe that the real value added by the Vibrant Communities approach to poverty reduction and community revitalization is the level of collaboration that it can achieve. It also provides an opportunity to spread leadership and responsibility for initiatives and outcomes across a spectrum of community partners.

For VC St. John's, organizing the work in a way that these goals are achieved includes experimenting with a staffing model in which a full-time coordinator would be based with the convenor organization (Community Services Council), but in which other staff members would be located with other organizational partners. The idea is to try to ensure that the work is a collaborative effort among various organizations, rather than essentially being done by a new stand-alone entity (i.e., VC St. John's). This decentralized staffing model is part of the initiative's overall plan and reflects organizers' theory of how change will ultimately be achieved – i.e., by enhancing engagement and collaboration. The effectiveness of this decentralized model will be one important focal point for ongoing learning.

VC St. John's has identified a series of learning questions as well. These will be explored through a variety of methods including periodic reflection on its own activities, observing the experiences of other Vibrant Communities Trail Builders and taking part in electronic and face-to-face learning events organized by the national Vibrant Communities initiative. Learning themes of particular interest to VC St. John's are:

- engaging people living on low income in a meaningful way, while avoiding tokenism and stigmatization
- gaining a better understanding of what it means to develop integrated strategies

- analyzing the approaches to poverty reduction taken by other Vibrant Communities and deciding which will be most effective in the St. John’s context
- determining best evaluation practices and ensuring ongoing, detailed measurement of efforts to reduce poverty
- creating an enabling environment that allows a good flow of information between community partners and the province’s Poverty Reduction Strategy
- finding effective mechanisms for sharing VC St. John’s lessons with individuals, partner organizations and the wider community.

Partners on the VC St. John’s Leadership Team feel strongly that “poverty reduction is not rocket science.” It’s about identifying where it can have impact and engaging partners from all sectors to make it happen.

Anybody and everybody can end up in a situation where they live on low income or in poverty. Every person, every business and every organization has a role to play making sure that no child, family or individual in our City has to live in poverty.”

– Deborah Jackman, member of Citizen’s Voice network

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