

La Démarche: Revitalizing Neighbourhoods in Trois-Rivières

Becoming a Vibrant Communities participant is a process that requires a concerted effort by the convening organization to develop its ideas on how it will bring about sustained poverty reduction.

Introduction

Trois-Rivières in Québec's heavily forested Mauricie region lies half-way between Montréal and Québec City along the north shore of the Saint Lawrence River. A world capital in the pulp and paper industry since the 1930s, the City's economy has also relied on metal transformation, electronics, thermoplastics, food crops and furniture making. Amalgamated in 2002 with six other municipalities, the Trois-Rivières metropolitan area is home to 141,500 residents [Statistics Canada 2006]. Noted for an international standards racetrack and a well regarded postsecondary institution (the *Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières*, established in 1969), it ranks as one of the province's principal medium-sized cities.

Trois-Rivières is the birthplace of *Économie communautaire de Francheville* (ÉCOF), which translates as Francheville Community Economy. (Francheville was one of the smaller municipalities which amalgamated with Trois-Rivières.) Founded in 1996, ÉCOF adopted goals similar to other community economic development corporations in Quebec: the mobilization and empowerment of the local population; dialogue and joint action among local actors; innovation; and an approach which is adapted to people's needs [Ninacs 2003]. Three strategies take the work from vision to action: labour force development, enhancement and transition to work; support for private and social entrepreneurship; and neighbourhood revitalization projects.

ÉCOF initially worked in four 'first neighbourhoods' (*premiers quartiers*). At the turn of the 20th century, these areas housed the relatively uneducated labour force that worked in Trois-Rivières' paper mills, sawmills and textile plants. Because many of these facilities have closed over the years and others

have trimmed their workforces to suit new production requirements, unemployment levels in the first neighbourhoods have traditionally been higher than in other parts of the city.

On average, 45 percent of families in the *premiers quartiers* live with low incomes [Statistic Canada 2001]. The proportion of adults over 15 years of age with less than nine years of education ranges from 16 percent to 58 percent by neighbourhood. Many young people leave the area to look for work, so the population as a whole is aging. A very high 57 percent economic inactivity rate – meaning those who are unemployed as well as those who have given up looking for work and dropped out of the labour market – suggests that the majority of people are dependent on government benefits.

Though large companies are now almost entirely absent from the area, there are about 1,000 small businesses within ÉCOF's territory. Many community resources are situated in the *premiers quartiers* and residents have expressed strong attachment to their neighbourhoods. People make good use of local services and readily participate in community festivals and celebrations. Organizers believe that the area has the potential for recovery.

A new community player

ÉCOF's interest in neighbourhood work in the late 1990s led to the formation of *La Démarche de revitalisation des premiers quartiers* (First Neighbourhoods Revitalization Process) in 2001. That year, an 18-member partners committee and 40 participants established a local barter system and community garden, and organized residents to request municipal action for lighting on streets and public housing. They also launched a new annual job fair – attended by 3,000 people – to promote mutual assistance, training and jobs. Members created and distributed a newsletter to 8,000 residents to keep them informed of services and activities in their neighbourhoods. Work expanded in 2003 into a further five *premiers quartiers*, known collectively as Cap-de-la-Madeleine, and two other neighbourhood portions were added as other areas of interest in 2008. The combined population of the 11 neighbourhoods is 32,000.

Neighbourhoods involved in the work of La Démarche:

4 original: St-François, Ste-Cécile, Notre-Dame et St-Philippe

5 Cap-de-la-Madeleine: Ste-Madeleine, St-Lazare, Ste-Famille, St-Eugène, St-Gabriel

2 new: St-Sacrement, a portion of Ste-Marguerite

Today, ÉCOF retains legal and financial responsibility for *La Démarche*, which is currently managed by a four-member Executive Committee and a 13-member Coordinating Committee. The Executive Committee handles day-to-day operational decision-making. Two full-time staff members manage *La Démarche*; part-time staff are hired as project funds allow and up to 80 resident volunteers

assist in project delivery. The Coordinating Committee includes federal and provincial government representatives, a municipal councillor, a Centraide (United Way) director, a school board and business representative, two neighbourhood residents and several community members.

La Démarche functions as an oversight organization that brings community players together to initiate action based on the needs identified by first neighbourhood residents. Its Coordinating Committee performs research, organization and coordination functions, taking program and strategy ideas from the grassroots and finding the best possible community organization – ÉCOF or others – to manage the resulting project. *La Démarche* has formulated a community plan to guide its work over the next three years.

Neighbourhood work now under way is divided among two citizens' sub-committees: one to serve the five neighbourhoods in the Cap-de-la-Madeleine sector, another for the remaining six spread throughout Trois-Rivières. Each of these committees directs neighbourhood-specific projects. Three other sub-committees – financial, a citizens group and a theme-based committee – comprise the remaining operational structures. Low-income resident participation is embedded in all aspects of the initiative's operations. Needs and program gaps identified through the citizen sub-committees are forwarded to the Partners Committee. The partners consider potential action strategies and funding sources, and identify potential partners and leaders for the work.

Despite contributions from several local and provincial government funders, *La Démarche* staff members have had difficulty securing operational funding. *La Démarche* has continued to operate on a project-focused basis, but organizers hope that its successful Vibrant Communities application in 2008 will provide the resources required to achieve a more comprehensive approach to neighbourhood revitalization and poverty reduction. Goals and strategies have been developed to guide *La Démarche* in its efforts from 2009-2011.

Understanding poverty and poverty reduction

Members of *La Démarche* believe that poverty is an inability to respond to basic needs (i.e., food; affordable housing) because people lack the necessary resources. It is also caused by lack of access to training, services, employment, culture and recreation. Poverty includes an emotional dimension – often accompanied by isolation and exclusion. It wears people down and is a difficult state from which to emerge.

La Démarche organizers wish to return personal power to first neighbourhood residents to enable them to attain a better quality of life. This objective will be achieved by making improvements in the areas of the environment, security, housing, employment, access to services and training, and creating opportunities for self-expression. This aspiration also requires efforts to change public perceptions of the first neighbourhoods.

The ultimate goal of *La Démarche* is to bring about improvements in residents' quality of life by combating poverty and social exclusion. Members believe that poverty is characterized by four factors:

- low income – which may include reliance on income supports, poor housing and hunger
- social isolation – including weak family ties, involvement in prostitution, mental illness, low literacy proficiency and large numbers of people living alone
- lack of participation or interest in the political process
- environmental degradation – green spaces are disappearing as development pressures increase.

As a result of lost jobs and the migration of experienced manufacturing workers to other cities, the first neighbourhoods' remaining population has a higher than average proportion of low- or no-skills workers. Formerly a strongly union-supportive community, fewer people are now attached to larger labour entities, which have a tradition of encouraging voluntarism and community organization. A key community development task for *La Démarche* is to re-create a critical mass of people willing to work together to create positive change.

Goals and strategies

The goal of *La Démarche* is to make the *premiers quartiers* an agreeable area in which to live where people can experience a good quality of life. Members seek to build a united community that is able to self-organize and where residents can find solutions to their common problems.

After seven years of operation, organizers have witnessed volunteer fatigue and turnover. They recognize the need to continuously develop citizen leaders and prepare them for roles in the work of *La Démarche*. Second, organizers believe that to make significant progress in the work, they need to move from an exclusively poverty-oriented focus to one which stresses improved quality of life in the first neighbourhoods. Broadening the initiative's focus will allow *La Démarche* to more strategically involve middle-income earners, thereby enlarging its engagement base. Leadership training may prove an attractive option for both low- and middle-income earners in Trois-Rivières. Once involved in developing their own skills, participants can be introduced to the goals and volunteer opportunities of *La Démarche*.

La Démarche's leadership also hopes to achieve a better balance between strategic planning and project activity. Most participants prefer action to planning. This is especially true of Trois-Rivières' small business owners who – though supportive of *La Démarche* – generally have only two or three staff members.

One possible solution to both turnover and achieving deeper levels of involvement may be to develop a bold statement of intent – a community aspiration – which captures interest and summarizes *La Démarche*'s goals. The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction's aspiration of "Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child" has itself become a powerful way to capture interest and summarize its purpose.

La Démarche organizers have identified four priority action areas for the next three years:

- improvements to housing conditions
- increased work incomes for those living in poverty
- development of a learning culture in the 11 priority neighbourhoods
- stronger social economy and joint responsibility for responding to the needs expressed by residents.

Two overarching strategies will be used to address the action areas. First, *La Démarche* will work to achieve the collective mobilization of residents and partner groups. Second, it will help empower individuals and groups within the *premiers quartiers*. Partners, community group and resident input were used to determine which strategies would be developed and included in the initiative's community plan.

collective mobilization of residents and partner groups

strategy one: collective mobilization

Stimulating local participation will be achieved by holding regular public meetings, developing citizen-operated communication channels and involving residents in specific projects. Organizers plan to create a citizen network – houses in each neighbourhood which can be used as a convening, sharing and organizing space. The network will build on the community house established in 2006 in the St-Philippe neighbourhood. *La Démarche* will also create opportunities for local leaders to emerge and develop by offering to involve them in organizational and committee work.

strategy two: mobilization and involvement of neighbourhood organizations

La Démarche will maintain coordinating and area committees in order to create spaces for organizational representatives to meet and work together on projects. Its members will identify at least one person from each organization to act as the principal contact between its work and that of *La Démarche*. Once a year, community organization directors will be invited to an information session about *La Démarche*'s work. Every effort will be made to support organizational initiatives whose objectives are complementary to the work in the *premiers quartiers*. *La Démarche* members will mobilize partners at regional and national levels in order to secure the resources and expertise needed to carry out the initiative's work.

empowering individuals and groups

access to high quality affordable housing

La Démarche will establish a social real estate agency – an intermediary organization connecting renters with landlords. Second, it will support the creation of a building society to better link people to one another. Third, it will develop a social housing project in partnership with the municipality, province and the Trois-Rivières housing committee.

supporting access to employment earnings

The initiative will allow community-based employment assistance services to recruit more residents. It will promote and support job training programs, continue the development of the annual employment fair and organize an access to employment symposium.

develop a learning culture and encourage access to training

L'Accorderie – a local services exchange initiative created by *La Démarche* in 2006 ÉCOF – will be helped to increase its membership, which now stands at 200. The annual employment fair's training component will be enriched. *La Démarche* will undertake a detailed needs and barriers analysis in order to improve residents' access to training. From this study, it will establish a training committee to develop new training initiatives.

support the development of the social economy in response to community needs

La Démarche will support the creation of an eco-hotel in les *premiers quartiers* and a community centre in the Cap-de-la-Madeleine area (which includes five of the nine first neighbourhoods). Members will craft a plan to establish a local history museum in an unused church and assist in the establishment of a health clinic. Residents have suggested three other social economy projects: a coffeeshop/laundry enterprise, a community gym project (*Communogym*) and a public market.

Targets for the work

Access to low-cost housing – 300 low-income households will gain access to quality housing over a three-year period (100 in 2009, 120 in 2010, 80 in 2011). A five-year affordable housing plan will be formulated as part of this work. Though ambitious, the plan to have 100 quality housing options available in 2009 is based on a long-recognized housing need and extensive preparatory activities undertaken by a number of community partners.

Access to employment – 1,200 people will find employment over the next three years (400 per year). By the end of that period, *La Démarche* will have developed a comprehensive employment strategy for the first neighbourhoods.

Access to training – The initiative will soon launch a 1,000 person door-to-door training needs survey with funds from a community partner. In 2010, a citizens training committee will be formed and, based on its work and findings, a first neighbourhoods global training strategy will be developed in 2011.

Development of the social economy

If all goes according to the community plan, *La Démarche* anticipates the opening of the eco-hotel and a second neighbourhood house in the Cap-de-la-Madeleine sector in 2009. In 2010, an eco-restaurant facility will be established in the eco-hotel, the Trois-Rivières historic centre will be completed and a health co-operative will be launched. In 2011, a public market will be created and a recycled bicycle shop will open.

Signs of progress

La Démarche participants measure progress by the success of individual project initiatives and the level of community involvement. To date:

- 100 residents have been involved in the initiative
- a bicycling lending co-op was established in 2004 and continues to thrive (250 bikes loaned out for 2,000 trips per year)
- three community gardens have been established
- a 200-member service exchange (*L'Accorderie*) is in operation
- a coffeehouse-laundromat social economic enterprise (*Bucafin*) opened in 2003
- a skate park was launched in the St-François neighbourhood in 2006
- an alleyway was renovated as a public meeting space
- 100 women took part in self-defense courses
- a purchasing co-op was established
- 60 residents received leadership training
- over a five year span, more than 800 people entered or re-entered the workforce as a result of their participation in *La Démarche's* annual job fair.

Extending and sustaining the work

Vibrant Communities convenor organizations seek to make their work comprehensive. One level of comprehensiveness is to engage partners from multiple sectors – including business, government, nonprofit and people living on low incomes – in a wide range of activities. *La Démarche* is already operating well within this level of comprehensiveness, though it needs to include more business representatives and low-income residents in the Coordinating Committee. People living on low incomes are engaged in the work of the neighbourhood committees. Individuals with leadership potential are being encouraged to take on greater levels of responsibility.

Numerous business partners have been involved in strategy work but, to date, have shown less inclination to join planning efforts. Taking a proactive but soft approach, *La Démarche* continues to meet regularly with members of the business community, combining wine and cheese celebrations with introductions to their work. Their aim is to identify business-people with the interest, vision and leadership skills necessary to lend weight and credibility to the initiative's efforts. Learning from the experiences of other Vibrant Communities convenors will also provide ideas for other ways to engage the business sector.

A deeper level of comprehensiveness involves deep and durable reductions in poverty by mobilizing resources beyond the neighbourhood. The potential advantage of including partners from the wider community is that they can work together to effect change and investigate whether there are policy changes which they collectively can support.

La Démarche members feel confident that by grounding their efforts in the input of first neighbourhood residents and including them in all aspects of the work, their contributions will be both

relevant and effective. Members of the Coordinating Committee have already demonstrated a collective power to influence policy at the local level. The City's continued representation on the committee will ensure that poverty issues remain on the municipal agenda. Work done on affordable housing at the provincial and federal level has also been influenced by *La Démarche*. Its members will continue to meet with government officials in order to create a better match between policy and practice.

Organizers know that policies and programs alone are not sufficient to help people move out of poverty. The approach of *La Démarche* and ÉCOF is to also include local capacities, assets and an economic driver. In each of its community economic development projects, *La Démarche* has sought to weave in economic, financial and social elements. Projects that create jobs, offer employment training and provide services which are of value to the entire community are based in the principles of sustainability.

Quebec's work over the past decade to create an environment that is supportive of social enterprises has been of enormous help to ÉCOF and others who seek to blend social responsibility with economic success. *La Démarche* offers an opportunity to bring this work to a higher level of cooperation, collaboration and policy change. *On y va!*

Anne Makhoul, Jean-François Aubin, Caroline Lachance and Dal Brodhead

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1390 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 401, Ottawa, ON K2C 3N6 CANADA
Phone: (613) 729-3340 Fax: (613) 729-3896
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org Website: www.caledoninst.org