

The Quality of Life CHALLENGE: Phase Two

Introduction

Situated at the southern tip of Vancouver Island and encompassing the southern Gulf Islands and 13 municipalities, BC's Capital Region is both charming and challenged. Along with a friendly climate, beautiful environment and close proximity to the ocean, residents of British Columbia's Capital Region live with extremely high house prices, the low wages paid by hospitality and small businesses, and child care that is both costly and hard to find. This combination of financial pressures has forced many young people and families with children to move to more affordable communities.

In 2009, the cost of living and housing remain among the highest in the country. The results – an inability to attract workers, new immigrants and younger people, a declining birth rate and shrinking workforce – are testing the region's ability to sustain and grow its economy. The number of working poor and people who are unstably housed – couch surfers and people without homes – is also on the rise.

Over the last 15 years, BC's Capital Region has benefited from a growing awareness and understanding of how people can work collaboratively to make their community one that cares for and about its people. A commitment to creating a sustainable quality of life – environment-

The Quality of Life CHALLENGE was established in the early 2000s. One of the first initiatives to join the Vibrant Communities network in 2003, it had already evolved a statement of operations and principles upon which to base its work. That 'framework for change' helped guide activity until 2006, during which a period of transition took place. As the CHALLENGE moves into its second phase of activity, participants are reviewing the lessons learned during the transition and are considering whether their original goals and principles will hold true.

ally, economically and socially – for all residents of the region continues to inspire local movements for change.

Looking back

The Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria (Community Council) made a decision to join Vibrant Communities in 2003, but it had done a great deal throughout the 1990s to help build the region’s capacity for multisectoral collaboration. In 1994, the Community Council organized a “Creative Chaos” forum to explore the City’s quality of life issues. In 1996, it helped facilitate CRUNCH – a process where partners from various sectors came together to work on downtown Victoria’s complex social problems: lack of housing, poverty, poor health, safety and security concerns, and shrinking resources. Through CRUNCH, the participating agencies and individuals formulated working principles – multisector engagement, a comprehensive approach, mutual respect and the active involvement of downtown residents – which continued to shape the Community Council’s approach to community development.

The Community Council also encouraged the development of partnerships around housing affordability, community mapping and food security – as part of an ongoing effort to raise awareness about poverty and the region’s pressing social issues.

In 2001, the Community Council and a network of individuals, organizations and businesses decided to launch a new initiative – the Quality of Life CHALLENGE that would encompass the larger regional district. Some 100 people attended a Founding Gathering at which participants called for a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction that would focus on improving quality of life indicators in the region. The CHALLENGE gradually strengthened its ties with Vibrant Communities and operated a first phase of activity in partnership with that organization from 2003 to 2006.

Principles determine outcomes

In essence, the CHALLENGE is a process and a way of working together. Those engaged with the initiative vary in their levels of involvement, be they members of the Leadership Roundtable, business owners that have learned from the CHALLENGE’s human resources projects or a partner working on a specific project.

Phase One of the CHALLENGE was guided by a set of clearly articulated working principles. Those engaged in the initiative grew to understand that these values formed the foundation and standard for their decision-making and actions. As partners continued to learn how to apply these principles, they deepened collective understanding about how to work more effectively to transform their own organizations, spheres of influence and the community at large. They believed that such an approach would help them to achieve long-lasting outcomes.

Working principles

The Quality of Life CHALLENGE:

- *works collaboratively and strategically towards common, shared goals*
- *works respectfully with people who live on low and limited incomes through full inclusion in all phases of development and decision making;*
- *fully engages communities through increasing awareness and understanding about quality of life and poverty;*
- *fosters corporate and personal leadership and responsibility for the care of the community, in particular for people who live in poverty;*
- *respects those who are already involved in reducing and preventing poverty by recognizing, linking and building on all efforts in order to increase efficiency while minimizing duplication and cost;*
- *tracks and celebrates all efforts and contributions that are made toward the goals.*

In its first phase, the CHALLENGE recognized seven mechanisms for achieving change. These included: shared leadership, awareness-raising, recognition of partners and their contributions, community ownership of issues and solutions, relationship development, inclusion of people with lived experience of poverty, and monitoring and measuring change.

Housing, sustainable incomes and community connections were the priority action areas in phase one. A Regional Housing Trust Fund – whereby local municipalities pool and leverage funds – was established and continues to grow. Work on “the employer CHALLENGE” – a human resources-focused initiative – and a well-received “HR Options for Action” handbook helped employers to identify, address and celebrate sustainable income and quality of life achievements. The creation of the Community Action Team – made up of people living with low incomes – stimulated discussion, and the development of policies and activities related to the realities of living in poverty. These and other CHALLENGE highlights were captured in stories and celebrated in community awards and events.

Dealing with transition

Late in 2005, CHALLENGE organizers were already considering how they would bridge the transition from start-up to sustainability, from Phase One to Phase Two priorities and to new leadership and structures. Four years later, they believe the lessons learned would benefit other Vibrant Communities initiatives as they too grapple with shifts in priorities, leadership, governance, funding and operations. The extensive time and effort to transition successfully on so many levels is often not understood or recognized within the non-profit sector. There is always considerable ongoing work to do and pressing needs to move forward. Reflection is a luxury most smaller non-profit organizations can't afford.

Leadership transitions are critical times within the lifecycle of an organization. Transferring leadership within staff and among volunteers has proven to be more difficult than expected. The guiding principles of the CHALLENGE, the context within which partners work, and the myriad relationships established are not easily transferable. Given this complexity, identifying a new visionary leader proved to be very difficult. Prior to the change in leadership, in-depth analysis and input on the roles, authority and accountabilities of the new director within a revised structure, particularly from internal stakeholders, would likely have flagged many of the issues that were encountered.

During the transition process, the CHALLENGE's relationship with the convener organization, the Community Council, was also examined. Initial thoughts that the Quality of Life CHALLENGE in Phase Two would be stronger, engage more businesses and attract new funding as a separate entity proved to be more complex than had been thought. The CHALLENGE and Community Council have reaffirmed the relationship between the two entities and are clear and confident in their decision that the CHALLENGE is a strategic initiative of the Community Council focused on reducing and preventing poverty.

The process of moving from Phase One to Phase Two of the CHALLENGE took much longer than anyone had imagined. Consideration was given to decision-making processes, existing and new relationships, an environmental scan of the community's poverty reduction work and, given the results of Phase One, questions regarding the direction of Phase Two. Many questions had to be answered: Who was going to be at the table? What would the priorities be? Who should decide on the priorities for Phase Two? Thoughtful conversations followed with other collaborative initiatives in the community. The process of setting the priorities and identifying Leadership Roundtable members involved listening, reflection and thought around the new structure required. As ever, the CHALLENGE's principles – particularly the central principle of inclusion – provided a strong framework for restating priorities. A Strategic Community Plan, edited and redeveloped several times, became a useful tool for planning.

Funding this type of work requires clarity of vision. CHALLENGE partners have come to appreciate deeply the role of patient funders like The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and Coast Capital Savings Credit Union. In a time of transition, and with new players at the table, successful revenue generation has been difficult. As the transition process lengthened, partners realized the high cost of lost momentum in terms of external perceptions and expectations.

The CHALLENGE still faces difficulty in terms of funding within a context where core or unallocated revenues are disappearing, where project funding tends to be in three-year cycles and where many of the initiative's components are moving into fourth and fifth year funding cycles.

The CHALLENGE has emerged from this transition process with a clear work plan and framework for change. This has not been easy. The process has tested relationships, demonstrated the level of commitment to the vision of the CHALLENGE, and required a high level of patience and resolve. The solid leadership of the CHALLENGE Caucus (the executive of the Leadership Roundtable and others) allowed the initiative to rise above its governance and funding difficulties.

These volunteers and leaders invested countless hours to weather the storms of the transition. They have remained constructive and have focused on the high level vision while managing operational realities. The Board of the Community Council has been equally committed and has striven to support the initiative effectively.

Onward and upward

The Community Council retains financial and legal responsibility for the CHALLENGE. A core group including Leadership Roundtable members and Community Council staff and Board members, have formed the CHALLENGE Caucus. The Caucus is providing a mechanism by which the authority of the initiative is spread among a group of people who share a common vision.

The CHALLENGE continues to rebuild trust and re-establish momentum in the community. They have a business plan in place and are taking a year-by-year approach to the funding profile.

Sustainable incomes, housing and community connections – the three main priorities in Phase One – have now been revised to include increasing sustainable incomes, reducing the costs of living and creating learning opportunities. After much deliberation, the framework for Phase Two became “Affordability: Increasing Incomes and Decreasing Costs of Living.” Though organizers stand firmly behind the principle of inclusion, they are uncertain of how they can expand efforts in this area in the second phase.

The inclusion dilemma

During Phase One, the CHALLENGE’s Community Action Team (CAT) was successful in building a mechanism for including and nurturing the skills brought by people with lived experience of poverty. Its initial coordinator now has graduated with a Masters in Community Development. She and other CAT members have come to realize that ‘inclusion’ is a much broader concept than they had originally understood.

In moving to Phase Two, with the intention of broadening the concept of inclusion, but with the reduction in the number of leadership roundtable meetings, CAT members’ roles and opportunities within the CHALLENGE framework have been less clear. The group remains strongly committed to the initiative and to reducing poverty. Though there are fewer resources available, they continue to meet and explore leadership opportunities.

The CHALLENGE has submitted funding proposals to expand the reach of its inclusion efforts to attract people from the disabilities movement, new Canadians, people exiting the sex trade and those with substance abuse issues. Though this work is foundational to the success of poverty reduction efforts, it is exactly the kind of initiative that is the most difficult to fund. It is invisible and intangible. The CHALLENGE hopes that a forthcoming project on the subject of inclusion and

diversity may attract additional funding , and that CAT may expand its activities and become one of a cluster of inclusion and diversity-focused initiatives.

Increasing sustainable incomes

Between 2008 and 2011, the CHALLENGE is focusing on three goals. First, it will contribute to 8,000 people in BC’s Capital Region moving along the pathway out of poverty. Second, it will contribute to at least three policy changes that remove systemic barriers to employment or reduce costs of living for those living on low incomes. Third, it will bring



together at least 100 voluntary sector organizations, 100 businesses and 50 representatives from the public sector every year to reduce and prevent poverty in BC’s Capital Region.

The central understanding which now underpins the CHALLENGE’s work and goals came as a result of conversations about Living Wage. A great deal of research about the issue and discussions with employers led to the realization that more people would be drawn into the CHALLENGE’s orbit by shifting to a sustainable income focus, rather than promoting the adoption of higher wage levels. The notion of an “Affordability Index” was seen as a way to capture the link between increasing incomes and reducing costs of living.

Building on the work done with employers in Phase One, the CHALLENGE continues to encourage human resources practices that improve quality of life and reduce poverty. The CHALLENGE is nurturing and strengthening community economic development enterprises – those which employ hard-to-employ groups and which create social and economic spinoffs. The initiative continues to act as a community catalyst for removing systemic barriers to employment and exploring policy alternatives that could increase incomes, especially for those living on low incomes

Reducing costs of living

The Affordability Index will be determined using new region-specific statistics. It will be produced and disseminated annually in order to identify costs that the CHALLENGE and other

partners can reduce, including child care, housing, health care, food and transportation. It is anticipated that the Affordability Index will encourage broader participation and is truer to the CHALLENGE's quality-of-life orientation.

Creating learning opportunities

The CHALLENGE hopes to create more opportunities for providing individuals and families with practical information on coping with the daily challenges of poverty, and for identifying opportunities to better their quality of life.

Concluding notes

Still guided by its principles, the CHALLENGE will continue to lead work on poverty reduction and engage business in social issues. These relationships now need to be supplemented and extended through strengthening relationships with provincial and municipal government representatives. Provincially, the CHALLENGE has been seeking systemic change with the other BC Vibrant Communities in Surrey and Abbotsford and as part of the newly-formed, broad-based BC Poverty Reduction Coalition.

Locally, the CHALLENGE's networks have helped stimulate conversation among local councillors and mayors in order to encourage them to pass a motion in support of a provincial poverty reduction plan at the Union of British Columbia Municipalities. Being able to build this kind of support speaks very strongly of the initiative's relationship capacity, and the value and richness of its input.

Though everyone involved would agree that the CHALLENGE is emerging from a very difficult time, strong commitment to the vision remains a uniting force. Despite the chaotic times, new partners are coming to the table, thanks to the continued outreach and engagement of senior members. The CHALLENGE continues to experience growth, despite limiting circumstances.

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Endnote

1. Acting as a convening body – sharing the responsibility for the myriad efforts of a multisectoral collaborative while maintaining momentum and achieving success on poverty reduction – requires cooperation, flexibility and trust. Vibrant Communities will be publishing a paper on the role of the convener in the near future.

Reference

Quality of Life CHALLENGE. (2007). *A Bold New Way for People in BC's Capital Region to Work Together: Report of Phase One 2003-2006*. Victoria: Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria.

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