

The Social Role of Local Government

by

Sherri Torjman and Eric Leviten-Reid

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Background

This paper explores the social role of local governments. It is one of a series of papers written in support of the Vibrant Communities initiative. The Vibrant Communities projects throughout the country have sought to involve representatives from local government in their respective efforts.

Vibrant Communities is a four-year national effort to explore promising local solutions to reduce poverty. The initiative is being sponsored by the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. Human Resources Development Canada is funding the policy component of the work.

Selected conveners from 14 cities across the country are involved in a Pan-Canadian Learning Community in which they come together on a monthly basis to share ideas, resources and strategies, and to plan their collective effort. (It is anticipated that an additional site will join in the coming months.) The communities effectively 'scale up' their individual efforts through this collaborative strategic approach.

In addition, five of these communities will receive substantial funds to support their poverty reduction work. In order to qualify for these funds, they must convene a multisectoral steering group that takes responsibility for the local effort and helps create a community-wide vision as well as a strategic plan with detailed actions. This steering group *must* include representatives from at least four sectors: business, government, anti-poverty groups and the voluntary sector.

Community-based approaches to solving pressing social and economic problems are not new. Voluntary action by citizens and organizations was alive and well long before government programs. What *is* new is the methodology that appears to be emerging at the local level – which is far more strategic than before. Funders, policy-makers and program designers have been exploring a range of approaches to revitalizing distressed neighbourhoods and to tackling other complex problems, such as unemployment and poverty. This new generation of efforts is known in the field as '*comprehensive community initiatives*.'

Comprehensive community initiatives have emerged both in response to recent practices that have proven ineffective and as a reformulation of approaches to community development that have been tried in the past. They also reflect views on the changing role of government and the place that communities play in promoting economic and social well-being.

These initiatives are described in more detail in a related paper [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003]. Briefly, they seek to engage diverse sectors in working together on a collaborative basis, over the long term, to tackle a wide range of interrelated issues. Local government is a crucial sector to engage in these efforts.

Many municipalities have not assumed an active or explicit social role in the past. Their responsibilities and interests have focused more upon physical infrastructure and the 'nuts and bolts' of city operations such as roads, sewers, waste disposal and water works. The extent of their social role involved the sponsorship of recreation programs, summer day camps and selected community events, such as music festivals.

As it turns out, recent literature is pointing to the importance of these activities both for individuals and for healthy communities. But the social role of local governments has expanded well beyond these domains – primarily in response to the evolving economic, social and political context that has created new pressures and new opportunities.

Challenges

Far too many cities in Canada experience high rates of unemployment and poverty. Many groups within these cities face additional problems related to marginalization – e.g., Aboriginal Canadians living in urban areas, highly skilled immigrants who are unemployed or underemployed, and persons with disabilities unable to find accessible housing. Hundreds of thousands of Canadians live in poor housing or on the streets. Young people often become involved in drugs, vandalism or criminal activity as they struggle to find their way.

These social pressures have been exacerbated by successive cutbacks throughout the 1990s [Torjman 2001]. Municipalities in Ontario, in particular, face the added problem of a rising cost burden. This millstone is partly the result of provincial disentanglement, or the 'who does what' exercise, undertaken in 1996. Regions now must assume primary responsibility for high-price items, such as social assistance and social housing. The costs of home care, in particular, are expected to rise steadily with an aging population.

Yet local governments are constrained in their ability to tackle these complex social issues. Throughout the country, there is a growing mismatch between the fiscal capacity of local governments and the diverse responsibilities they are expected to meet. The property tax base is too limited and regressive to support the wide range of social, economic and environmental challenges that local governments now face.

The other major source of revenue for municipalities – charges and user fees – can have a serious impact upon access to locally supported programs, such as cultural events and recreational facilities and programs. User fees inadvertently have become an insidious form of exclusion.

A related challenge for all cities arises from the aging of their physical hardware. Much of the infrastructure within urban areas – such as buildings, roads and sewers – requires upgrading or

replacement. The lifespan of any given property is about 35 years, after which it typically requires substantial overhaul or repair.

Another constraint on local governments is the fact that municipalities are not permitted to run deficits on their operating budgets. Local governments must pay for all their operating costs without 'borrowing from the bank.' Again, they either must raise taxes or cut programs in order to hold the line on spending.

In addition to dealing with these 'negative pressures,' major urban areas face 'positive pressures.' One of these positive pressures arises from demands to shift the way in which urban areas have grown in recent years in order to contain wasteful and damaging urban sprawl and to improve the quality of the environment. The shift in local planning effectively recognizes the need for more intelligent growth that respects the links between a healthy environment and a good quality of life, including human well-being broadly defined. In the industrialized world, a 'smart growth' movement has evolved which attempts to position urban growth within the context of sustainable development by making the links among environmental, social and economic health.

> In the past few years, widespread frustration with sprawling development patterns has precipitated an explosion in innovative thinking and action across the United States. This new thinking – generally labelled as 'smart growth' – contends that the shape and quality of metropolitan growth in America are no longer desirable or sustainable. It asserts that current growth patterns undermine urban economies and broader environmental objectives and exacerbate deep racial, ethnic and class divisions. It argues that these growth patterns are not inevitable but rather the result of major government policies that distort the market and facilitate the excessive decentralization of people and jobs [Katz 2002: 3].

Many cities across Canada have incorporated the principles of 'smart growth' into their planning processes. The City of Ottawa, for example, recently convened a Smart Growth Summit as part of its Ottawa 20/20 planning initiative. The Summit considered a wide range of emerging challenges – "everything from transportation and economic growth to affordable housing, arts and culture, and our evolving social needs" [City of Ottawa 2003]. It explicitly identified poverty as one of the issues to address in order to achieve economic, environmental and social well-being for all residents of Ottawa.

Many other cities are grappling with similar issues. Hamilton's Vision 2020 serves as its guide for sustainable development. The blueprint presents both a vision of a sustainable community and an evolving set of economic, environmental and social indicators to track progress in achieving that overall goal. The City of Winnipeg recently prepared a new development strategy, "A Homegrown Economic Development Strategy for Winnipeg," which explicitly embraced the principles of sustainable development. Since 1995, the City of Kelowna, British Columbia, has been introducing elements of smart growth into its Official City Plan. The Greater Halifax Partnership, a private/public collaboration, has been spearheading smart growth in that city.

Ideally, these initiatives seek a balance among economic, environmental and social factors appropriate to their local circumstances. Yet they often overlook a crucial dimension of smart growth: regional equity. New strategies and resources are being developed to promote this important component. For example, the San Francisco-based nonprofit organization, PolicyLink, has developed an "Equitable Development Toolkit," which identifies the range of strategies that cities can use to ensure that all citizens share the benefits of growth. These tools address issues such as affordable housing, controlled development, financing strategies, and income and asset creation [PolicyLink 2003].

The role of local governments also has become more important in a world moving increasingly towards the internationalization of many of its functions. This model of economic development is consistent with the growing global acknowledgement of large urban centres as the engines of national economies. This recognition has created pressure for major cities to become 'world class' actors on the international stage.

Urban areas face new demands arising from the need to attract investment and the best possible talent in the world. In order to attract the talent they require to compete economically, they must improve their 'quality of place' [Florida 2000]. Municipalities now must pay more attention to social and environmental factors than they might have in the past. They are viable as urban regions only to the extent that they have – and are seen to have – a good quality of life.

Talent has become the most critical factor of production. The ability to draw talent creates regional advantage [Florida 2000: 26]; the key to competitiveness lies in regions' ability to generate and apply ideas. Regional growth is strongly correlated with level of educational attainment. Florida maintains that amenities and the environment – particularly natural, recreational and lifestyle amenities – are vital to attracting knowledge workers and supporting leading-edge technology firms and industries.

Local governments face challenges related to this new 'world class' world. In order to survive in the new environment, communities need both magnets and glue [Kanter 1995]. 'Magnets' refer to the factors that attract a flow of external resources – such as new companies and new people – to renew and expand skills, and contribute to the economic health of the region. 'Magnet factors' typically include a healthy and well-educated workforce, clean environment, vibrant business climate, and a solid social and cultural infrastructure.

But communities also need 'glue' to hold them together. In addition to the physical infrastructure that supports daily life and work – roads, sewers, electricity and communications systems – communities require a social infrastructure to solve problems and promote the economic and social well-being of all their members. Interestingly, many factors that comprise the magnets of a local region – especially the solid social and cultural infrastructure – also effectively comprise its glue.

Assets and Opportunities

An important first step in facing both positive and negative pressures is to identify the new opportunities that present themselves in light of these research findings on the 'quality of place.'

In addition to these opportunities, there is significant factor working in favour of local governments: substantial assets upon which they can draw. Assets refer not only – or even primarily – to money. Rather, they comprise the wide range of expertise in any given community, its diversity, the many initiatives currently under way and the contribution of diverse sectors [Kretzmann and McKnight 1993]. Assets include, for example, a beautiful natural environment, high-quality educational institutions, cultural diversity, an active voluntary sector and exemplary local initiatives.

Comprehensive community initiatives seek to promote an asset-based approach to tackling local concerns. Rather than seeing only the problems and negative pressures that a community faces, the approach encourages the identification and building of strengths to expand local capacity and opportunities. Moreover, these initiatives seek to help low-income households, in particular, build assets so that they can make choices about their future. Following the approach popularized by John McKnight, comprehensive community initiatives often use asset-mapping techniques as a way to surface the hidden strengths of communities – their citizens and their institutions [Kretzmann and McKnight 1993].

Even problems or issues construed as negative often come with opportunities and there are several areas on the municipal front in which there are some open doors. While good jobs have been in short supply over the past decade, the future may be somewhat brighter. A shortage of skilled labour is forecast in many fields including nursing, education, construction and auto mechanics. These projected shortages are partly the result of an aging population, which is expecting substantial retirements and fewer citizens of working age.

Another opportunity arises from the fact that economic success in a knowledge economy depends largely upon nations' and regions' ability to produce, apply and create new knowledge. Virtually every city and region has the actual or potential assets to succeed in this 'new economy' [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003].

All communities are rich in another dimension – their social capital. This term refers to the relationships, networks and norms created when people come together out of a shared goal or purpose [Putnam 2000]. Social capital has been found to contribute to health and well-being in significant ways. Individuals in communities and societies with strong social capital tend to be more prosperous, healthier and experience less crime. Local governments can create or support occasions for people to come together for social, educational, recreational or cultural purposes.

Other opportunities arise from the findings of emerging research in such areas as the valuable social role of the arts and recreation – which typically fall within the jurisdiction of municipalities. Cultural events, for example, are unique in their ability to create social capital by bringing people together – particularly those who tend to be marginalized including young people, seniors and new Canadians. Recreation is emerging as a crucial investment, especially for families and children deemed to be 'at risk' [Browne et al. 1998]. Children who participate in organized recreation tend to have higher self-esteem, enhanced relationships with friends and stronger school performance.

Local Government Roles

The Vibrant Communities initiative seeks to foster communities that provide support for basic needs, ensure inclusion and promote learning for all [Torjman 2001]. Local governments have many of the levers to achieve these goals. Clearly, they cannot achieve these objectives on their own; they require the support of other levels of government – both in the form of direct grants and indirect assistance, such as information. But there is no question that local governments are on the front line when it comes to creating vibrant communities.

Local governments are in a position to promote awareness of the pressing social needs in the community and of the importance of social investment. They can foster a sense of responsibility for social well-being among all sectors including business, community groups and other levels of government. They can help build relationships among the diverse organizations and sectors that comprise the community. They can integrate more effectively the services that they themselves provide. Equally importantly, they can undertake, in collaboration with key partners, several focused interventions – or flagship initiatives – in order to tackle major issues such as poverty reduction.

More specifically, there are several roles that local governments can play in creating vibrant communities. These include exemplary employer, service provider, investor, leader and champion, convener and partner.

As *exemplary employers*, local governments can set the pace for all employers in the region. They first must get their own house in order, which means examining their training and employment practices to ensure that these set a positive example for employers in the region. Wages and benefits should be reviewed so that local governments themselves are not contributing to the ranks of the working poor.

Local governments can ensure that their employment practices are responsive to family needs, including flexible working arrangements, job sharing and unpaid leaves of absence for family reasons. Parents may need to take time occasionally for children's medical appointments and for attendance at school events. Local governments should reduce, where possible, the scheduling of

meetings during family time in the evenings and on weekends. Municipalities can support volunteerism by allowing workers a set number of paid hours per month for community service.

Finally, the demands of the knowledge economy create pressures for all employers to make available opportunities for ongoing staff training and upgrading. Local governments also should consider providing employment to those who typically have a difficult time breaking into the labour market, including workers with disabilities, recent immigrants and Aboriginal Canadians. With respect to young people, in particular, municipalities can offer mentoring, internships and student placements.

In Waterloo Region, Ontario, an innovative community-based poverty reduction initiative called Opportunities 2000 challenged local municipalities to assess their policies, programs and human resource practices to see how they could enhance their contribution to local poverty reduction. After reviewing its operations, the City of Kitchener identified a number of measures that it could take to improve its own employment practices.

The City decided to waive, for example, the normal waiting period required for new employees to access the employee benefits package, an important consideration for individuals moving from welfare to work, especially for those who require assistance with the cost of medications or other supports. Moreover, the City agreed to waive the 50 percent employee contribution for employees with lower incomes. It also offered to guarantee interviews to summer students identified as being in need and to create a seat for a low-income individual in computer training programs offered to its employees. Although modest measures, they represent the concrete steps that a local government as employer can take to contribute to poverty reduction [City of Kitchener 2000: 26].

As *service providers*, local governments can integrate service delivery more effectively. Most municipalities are involved – to varying degrees – in delivering a range of programs and services such as child care, social assistance, public health, and arts and recreation programs. In some cases, local governments provide these services directly. In other areas, such as child care, a mix of providers is involved and municipalities grant funds to help deliver these services.

Important research findings are emerging on the value of service integration, particularly the needs of children and families. Dr. Gina Browne and colleagues noted in *When the Bough Breaks* the positive impact of delivering services in an integrated or holistic way, rather than through the piecemeal approach typically employed by governments. Far too many resources are spent in duplicate assessment and administration; resources are wasted through services that work against rather than with each other.

Despite the evidence and apparent administrative efficiencies, most services still are organized on the basis of discrete categories such as public health, primary health, long-term care, school supports, child care, social services, corrections, recreation and leisure, housing and social assist-

ance. The integration of services does not require the amalgamation of departments so much as improved coordination of delivery. As service providers, municipalities also must ensure that they are able to respond to the needs of a population that is becoming increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse.

Some jurisdictions, such as the Cities of Edmonton and New York as well as the province of Saskatchewan, have taken practical steps towards service integration. On July 4, 2000, for example, Edmonton City Council approved its Integrated Service Strategy for the Community Services Department. The Strategy sets out a comprehensive framework for the integration of many city-delivered programs and services. The cornerstones include stronger decision-making roles for citizens, integrated and seamless service delivery, and clearly defined roles for the Community Services Department [City of Edmonton 2000].

In Hamilton, important integration has begun with respect to children's services in the areas of language and speech services. The City also has coordinated a range of services for families on social assistance with young children. Much more could be done in this area by moving together a range of public health, recreational, cultural and social services [Torjman, Leviten-Reid and Heisler 2002].

In response to the Opportunities 2000 challenge, the City of Kitchener noted that it was helping local community centres shift from their traditional recreation and leisure orientation to a more holistic resource centre model. In the process, the municipality was becoming a facilitator of a partnership approach which was delivering a more integrated set of recreational and social services [City of Kitchener 2000: 25].

In a similar vein, the Region of Waterloo's Public Health Department has become closely involved with the Opportunities 2000 project. In keeping with the social determinants of health perspective, the department recognized the importance of addressing a wide range of interrelated issues, including poverty, in order to promote health. It also saw the need to work through broad-based partnership initiatives to tackle effectively such multifaceted concerns. It has seconded staff to Opportunities 2000 to help link its work more closely with community efforts at poverty reduction.

While local governments are important *investors* in community programs and processes, social investment has been hampered by a lack of available funds. In recent years, federal and provincial cutbacks as well as municipalities' desire to toe the line on property taxes have created a difficult fiscal climate. Many local governments are engaging increasingly in public/private partnerships for capital intensive projects, such as housing.

A good example is the role that the City of Saskatoon is playing in a highly successful affordable housing program. The program enables a nonprofit community organization to purchase and refurbish houses with the participation of the prospective homeowner. The City contributes five percent of the cost of each house and the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation provides a forgivable equity loan amounting to 25 percent of the house's assessed post-renovation value, up to a maximum home value of $55,000. This financing makes it possible for low-income residents to secure an affordable mortgage from local financial institutions [Usiskin, Szejvolt, Keeling 2001: 4].

Of course, special care is needed to ensure that public/private partnerships are effective in serving their social objectives. Financial pressures on local governments can undermine the achievement of social objectives. As noted, many local governments have introduced or increased user fees for many facilities and programs in order to raise their revenues.

Local governments play an important role as both *leader* and *champion* for community-based poverty reduction initiatives. City councillors can help create awareness about social needs and the importance of social investment. They can foster a sense of responsibility for social well-being.

Local governments also can act as *conveners* of and *partners* with various sectors. They are in a unique position to convene the diverse sectors that should be involved in any community-based poverty reduction effort: business (individual companies as well as sectoral council representatives), labour, the education/training sector, social organizations and anti-poverty groups, and the federal and provincial governments, where appropriate.

The City of Edmonton through its Department of Community Services, for instance, is playing the role of convener in one such multisectoral poverty reduction initiative. It is sharing this role with a local nonprofit organization, the Edmonton Community Loan Fund. Each organization brings with it distinct strengths for mobilizing the broad community participation that such an initiative requires.

Specific Actions

The preceding section identified some of the roles that local governments can play in creating vibrant communities. But there are also specific actions that municipalities can take directly or in partnership with other sectors and organizations to reduce poverty. The following examples are by no means an exhaustive list; they are intended to illustrate the diverse measures that fall within the purview of local governments.

Meeting Basic Needs

i. Affordable housing

Thousands of Canadian families can barely make ends meet because their rent consumes most of their budget. They often go without food and other amenities, such as warm clothing; their paycheques don't cover even the basics. Many live in unsafe, infested or cramped quarters.

In the long term, the solution is to build additional affordable housing. But the cost of such an approach tends to be too onerous for the local tax base alone. The federal and provincial governments need to invest in the supply of new units or the conversion of existing units into low-cost housing. The resources of the private and voluntary sector also should be tapped for this purpose.

There has been some modest, but important, progress in housing. In November 2001, the federal government invested $680 million in affordable accommodation. The new dollars attracted five provinces and two territories to match the federal contribution. The 2003 federal Budget announced an additional $320 million over five years to bolster the supply of affordable housing. But total funding relative to the need remains woefully low. Cities have had to assume more responsibility, both in leadership and finance, to ensure an adequate supply of decent housing.

Some cities, such as Hamilton and Ottawa, have set up special partnerships in response to their housing supply problems. The mandate of these local bodies is to coordinate various housing efforts currently under way by different levels of government.

The City of Hamilton is exploring, for example, the creation of a Housing Partnership Fund to help finance the supply of affordable housing [Torjman, Leviten-Reid and Heisler 2002]. Other recent actions include the introduction of the Hamilton Convert-to-Rent Program, also intended to increase the affordable stock. In addition, the new Hamilton Home Emergency Repair Program provides emergency loans for lower-income homeowners who require immediate financial assistance for home repair. The City has established a separate property tax class for newly constructed or converted multi-residential rental buildings of seven units or more. This measure will lower residential property taxes by about one-half for new rental housing structures.

Finally, Hamilton City Council is exploring the implementation of a 'Consider Housing' policy for the disposition of City-owned lands. Such a policy means that first consideration is given to building housing on municipal lands deemed surplus. Another possible improvement is a Municipal Capital Facility bylaw, which would enable the City to use property tax exemptions to stimulate the production of affordable housing.

Other actions that local governments might consider include the conversion of dwellings to enhance the supply of affordable housing. Some municipalities already support, for example, the

development of secondary suites in primary residential dwellings. Secondary suites are distinct from accommodation in a rooming house in that they typically are created in homes which the owner occupies. These suites usually are constructed by modifying basements or subdividing the upper floors of existing homes. Secondary suites often are used by seniors who require smaller accommodation or by young persons who typically seek lower-cost housing [Pomeroy 2000].

Expanding the supply of affordable housing will take time. In the short term, subsidies to low-income households could alleviate much of the burden in finding decent, affordable housing. To ease problems related to affordability, the City of Hamilton has considered the option of funding and administering a rent bank with a $500,000 annual budget to help low-income households pay for short-term rent arrears. Development charges and other related fees would be waived for housing that meets affordability criteria.

In addition, local governments could consider the possibility of supplementing the shelter allowance that comprises the monthly welfare allowance – although this assistance would benefit only those on welfare and not the working poor. Local governments also might provide utility subsidies to help offset the high cost of electricity and heat.

As if affordability and lack of availability were not serious enough, another problem presents itself. Many members of visible minority communities face racism and discrimination, making it difficult – if not impossible – to find decent affordable housing. An increased supply of affordable housing would ease this problem by providing more choice to renters.

Many communities are also dealing with a crisis in homelessness, which appears to have worsened in recent years. Women's shelters turn people away on a nightly basis. Entire families are finding themselves in need of emergency shelter, often being split up in order to access existing services. The demand for emergency youth shelter is also overwhelming; many young people leave home because of abuse and violence, and subsequently end up on the street without shelter. The problem reflects the lack of decent affordable housing, the closure of psychiatric hospitals and the lack of supports for domestic violence and other mental health problems [Torjman, Leviten-Reid and Heisler 2002].

In response to the homelessness problem, the federal government announced in 1999 the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI). The funds help convene various players from the community to work together in tackling the complex problem of homelessness. There are currently 61 communities involved in this effort; local governments have been both conveners of and partners in this process. Many have contributed funds to ease the crisis in their communities. The 2003 federal Budget extended the SCPI program for another three years.

ii. Food and other essentials

In addition to housing, local governments can have a direct and immediate impact upon poverty by supplementing welfare allowances, which are provincially set. Virtually all households in receipt of welfare find it near impossible to make ends meet, given high rent, food, transportation and utility costs.

One direct action is to top up the food and shelter components of welfare benefits in order to reflect more accurately the true cost of living. Local governments also can provide a small transportation allowance or reduce fares during off-peak hours; many welfare recipients cannot go to school or training and are unable to look for work because they simply cannot afford the transportation. In addition, welfare budgets make no provision for a telephone. A telephone is important for job search – but it is also essential to prevent isolation and ensure that any person at risk of a medical emergency or domestic violence has access to immediate assistance.

But it is not only welfare recipients who have difficulty feeding their families. Many food bank users are employed on a full- or part-time basis. Local governments can take a more active role to ensure food security. They can partner with food banks and other organizations to promote a range of food security strategies: good food boxes, community kitchens and dinners, school breakfast and healthy snack programs, and community gardens for which local governments can allocate some of their land [Biglar 1998].

The Saskatoon Roots of Poverty Project made several recommendations to local government regarding food security, including ease of access to vacant land for community gardens so that residents could grow their own food and have a secure supply [Stensrud and Grosso 2002]. The group also called for the creation of a municipal food security policy to enable the local government to explore the range of actions they might take in this area, as exemplified by the work of the Toronto Food Policy Council. Similar recommendations were made by the Task Force on Poverty established by the City of Ottawa [Task Force on Poverty 1999].

The Toronto Food Policy Council is a sub-committee of the Toronto Board of Health. It operates innovative projects including Field to Table, which seeks to create bridges between low-income households' need for fresh produce and local farmers who have high-quality vegetables to sell. In 1992, Field to Table successfully launched a distribution service that makes fresh fruits, vegetables and eggs available to people where they live. Field to Table also runs a pre-order business for fresh produce targeted specifically to school food programs, buying groups and community markets.

Across North America, local food policy councils are being formed to spearhead diverse strategies for ensuring local residents have access to high-quality, affordable food; local farmers are able to earn an adequate living; and both the economic and environmental benefits of dynamic food

sectors are realized for all. The Ottawa Food Security Group and Waterloo Region's FoodLink, for example, have received active support from their local governments.

Supporting Economic Development

In addition to direct actions to reduce poverty, local governments can make a dent in this problem by enhancing opportunities for employment through skills development, job creation and work-related supports.

i. Skills development

Local governments can support the development of an appropriate skills base in their regions. As noted, larger urban centres must do this if they are to act as world-class players on the global stage in the search for knowledge workers.

Many local labour markets currently are struggling with skill mismatches. There may be unfilled jobs but insufficient workers with suitable skills. Shortages are expected in the skilled trades, for example, unless a concerted effort is made to recruit and train such workers. There is also a 'skills gap,' which refers to the inability to meet current skill requirements in terms of basic math, soft skills such as interpersonal relations, language competency and technological skills.

In some cases, it is essential to build basic skills prior to job training or paid employment. Programs focused on language skills help workers learn English or French. Literacy and numeracy skills are also prerequisites to employment. Job search involves assessing current skills, preparing résumés, self-marketing and acquiring information on job vacancies.

In connection with Opportunities 2000, the Region of Waterloo's Department of Community Services developed an employment program for social assistance recipients called Experience Matters. Using a customized training strategy (discussed below), the Region brought together social assistance recipients, nonprofit organizations, training institutions and local businesses to carry out an integrated program of life skills training, voluntary work placements and job skills development. Geared to preparing participants for local job vacancies, this initiative proved highly effective at facilitating the transition from welfare to work.

There are literally hundreds of innovative training programs that can act as models to guide this work. But there are fewer examples of employment-related comprehensive community initiatives, which typically assume a multisectoral approach to skills development. One notable model

was spearheaded by the City of Ottawa, which created Partners for Jobs to tackle the problem of high unemployment and underemployment in the region. The Regional Chairman (now Mayor of Ottawa) convened a Task Force with representatives from business, labour, anti-poverty groups, education, social services, and the federal and provincial governments.

The Task Force was able to generate new forms of training, apprenticeship and job creation. The welfare department and business sector worked together to develop short-term, geared-to-market training, known as 'customized training' [Torjman 1999c]. Special projects were undertaken to recognize the skills credentials of immigrants. Partners for Jobs also helped participants with associated problems related to child care, lack of funds for transition to work and business startup, and ongoing supports for job retention.

Another example is the Jobs Initiative, launched by the US-based Annie E. Casey Foundation in 1995. It is an eight-year demonstration project designed to improve access to family-supporting jobs for disadvantaged young adults in inner-city communities. The Foundation provided funds to six sites – Denver, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Seattle – to develop and implement job strategies and to test effective ways to promote access to employment [Plastrik and Taylor 2001].

The planning phase from 1995 to 1997 focused upon bringing together key stakeholders, analyzing regional barriers and opportunities, developing initial strategies for improving employment access and identifying possible projects in which the local initiative could invest. The purpose of this phase was to establish a multisectoral governance mechanism that could take responsibility for harnessing key resources in the community and developing an action plan.

While the projects within each site varied widely, several common elements contributed to their success. First, employer involvement in both planning and training was essential. Second, the projects that succeeded paid clear attention to the major sectors of the local economy and sought ways to support those sectors. Health care, manufacturing, construction and hospitality were the key sectors in which employment was found. Third, all the sites found that it was important to pay attention to soft skills, such as work attitudes. Post-placement services played a central role in ensuring the success of the initiatives.

Training businesses also have been used effectively to help women and young people acquire skills and work experience in such areas as food service, hospitality, lawn care, recycling, printing and car repair. Participants are paid a wage so that they earn an independent income while they learn about various aspects of running a business and acquiring market-relevant skills. Many training businesses report an enhancement of participant self-esteem, leadership and a sense of accomplishment.

Entrepreneurship training is another approach proven to be particularly effective with young people. This training typically is undertaken by a nonprofit organization or by the economic devel-

opment arm of local government. It is difficult, if not impossible, to set up microenterprise in the absence of capital investment – an asset well out of the reach of most low-income Canadians.

Finally, it is important to note that new Canadians face barriers to work because skills and experience acquired offshore often are not recognized in this country. Workplace discrimination also poses a significant barrier to the efforts of new Canadians to secure employment and advance up the job ladder. In this case, the solution lies not in acquiring new skills but in recognizing or upgrading the credentials they already have. Local governments can make an effort to provide employment opportunities to help recent immigrants acquire relevant Canadian experience, the lack of which often acts as a barrier to employment.

ii. Job creation

Local governments can take direct action to create favourable conditions for poverty reduction and economic growth more generally. The economic health of any region can be supported, for example, by developing internal market opportunities. Governments can promote awareness about regionally produced goods and available services as well as the benefits of supporting community business. Local sourcing of supplies and labour keeps more money in the community.

Local governments can foster economic development by protecting tracts of land for designated purposes, such as community business. The City of Hamilton, for example, has created an 'enterprise zone.' Taxes from the increased assessment resulting from the redevelopment or improvement of properties within the limits of the Downtown Business Improvement Area are returned to the developer in the form of a grant. The City also has adopted an Environmental Remediation and Site Enhancement Community Improvement Plan to make available grants for financial relief to property owners who undertake and complete brownfield redevelopment projects.

Local governments can bolster the growth of community businesses like the exemplary work in Halifax [Lewis 1999]. The Human Resources Development Association (HRDA) was created in 1978 with $275,000 from the Halifax welfare budget. HRDA is now a successful venture capital and business development group set up primarily to serve welfare recipients. Through its subsidiary, HRDA Enterprises Ltd., it created small businesses that placed more than 1,400 welfare recipients in newly created jobs in the areas of environmental care services, painting, property management, bakery, consultation and training, and sewing contracting.

There is increased awareness of the importance of local economies as the drivers not only of economic growth but also of regional innovation. Innovation is enabled through the creation of clusters, which foster the exchange of goods, services and – most importantly – information and knowledge [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003].

Clusters also provide the basis upon which to create jobs. *Jobs and the Urban Poor*: *Publicly Initiated Sectoral Strategies* assesses the potential of inner-city clusters, in particular, for increasing employment opportunities for the urban poor [Kwass and Siegel 1995]. Most of the projects described in this study sought to improve the competitiveness of an existing sector, encourage the growth of an emerging sector or create opportunities for employment within a sector. The projects selected include: the Industrial Networks Program of Louisville, Kentucky; Minority Participation in Public Works Construction of Portland, Oregon; New York/New Jersey Regional Alliance for Small Contractors; Industry Action Projects of Massachusetts; Garment Industry Development Corporation of New York; Initiatives in the Advanced Transportation Sector of Los Angeles, California; Philadelphia Recycling Consortium, Pennsylvania; Skills Training in Manufacturing Metalworking of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Life Sciences Strategy of Baltimore, Maryland; and the Biotechnology Industry Initiatives, Massachusetts.

Finally, lack of access to capital is a significant barrier to the development of community enterprise [Lewis 1999]. Local governments can help promote the development of financing options. They can provide loan funds directly to prospective entrepreneurs through community-based organizations. They can act as guarantors for community loans to afford some financial protection in support of high-risk ventures. They can make available seed capital to community loan funds which then use this money as leverage to raise funds from other levels of government, local businesses, private donors and foundations [Evoy 1997].

iii. Work-related supports

Skills and jobs are not the entire answer to the employment puzzle. There is also a need for work-related supports. First and most important is high-quality affordable child care [Battle and Torjman 2002]. Accessible and affordable child care is a smart investment in a competitive economy. Without it, parents cannot participate fully in the labour force. Good child care enables and supports education, training and employment. It is vital to promoting women's equality by enabling them to train for paid work, find work and keep working. Most importantly, high-quality child care is good for children.

Barriers to work often arise from the costs associated with job search or return to work. These costs include transportation for job interviews; work clothing; permits to drive a vehicle for work purposes or to operate equipment; professional dues or license fees; and equipment, such as tools or protective gear. Local governments can set up a labour force transition fund to offset some of these one-time or temporary costs. Local governments also can engage with other partners, such as community foundations or private businesses, to raise money for this purpose.

The cost of health- and disability-related special needs can be a major barrier to employment. The special assistance component of welfare provides for these needs in the form of wheelchairs,

hearing aids, prosthetic equipment, medications and assistive devices for independent living or work. Because special assistance items are intended primarily for welfare recipients, this policy virtually ties many individuals to this income program because they have no other source of support for the required aids and equipment. When recipients try to move off welfare, they may lose access to this vital assistance.

Persons with disabilities, in particular, may require some form of personal or work-related support. But they often find that there is little or no accommodation of their special needs. Many more would be able to work if they could get in the door or if they had access to required equipment or assistance.

Finally, the lack of accessible, affordable transportation can be a major barrier to self-sufficiency. There appear to be two key problems in this area. The first has to do with the cost of public transportation. Money for this purpose is not provided as part of the basic welfare allowance.

Local governments can take several actions to tackle this problem. They can reduce fares for persons who are trying to move off welfare into work or who are participating in some form of training program after a spell of unemployment. Bus passes could be made available for distribution through selected social agencies, as is the case in the City of Victoria. Lower fares also might be introduced during off-peak hours. This proposal would make public transit more affordable for all members of the community.

Some regions face general barriers with respect to public transit over and above the issue of affordability. The problem can be summed up in a nutshell: You cannot get there from here. Because the bus companies in some communities are run by individual local governments, the arrangement can create local transit problems. In theory, it is possible to respond to this problem by encouraging prospective workers or students simply to move closer to their work or school. But here they may come smack up against the lack of affordable housing. Where possible, local transit systems should be regionalized or, at the very least, linked together to ensure easy access [Torjman 1999]. In some cases, special transportation services should be established to enable workers to travel easily from residential neighbourhoods to areas where new businesses are located.

Investing in Early Childhood

Early childhood services generally are seen as the purview of provincial governments and not the concern of local governments. But in reality, concern with early childhood development is everybody's business, given what we know about the importance of investing in the early years.

The first few years of life are critical for brain development and affect children's subsequent performance at school and, eventually, in the job market. The conditions of the early childhood years, including prenatal development, influence significantly a person's chances throughout life. Children who do not receive the nutrition and stimulation necessary for good development in the earliest months and years of life may have difficulty overcoming deficits later on. Investment in early childhood nutrition, stimulation and development is a crucial preventive measure [McCain and Mustard 1999].

Research evidence has found that the effects of disadvantage on children can be reduced by a number of careful interventions, such as good prenatal health and adequate nutrition of the mother; good perinatal health and adequate nutrition of the child; bonding of the child with a nurturing caregiver; positive, encouraging discipline; opportunities for learning experiences in the home and community, especially early childhood education; and positive value being placed on learning and education by the caregiver. Supportive initiatives for parents should begin as early as possible – not just for low-income households but for families at all socioeconomic levels [Hertzman 1999].

Many local governments invest directly in early childhood development or partner with the wide range of organizations involved in this field. Some local governments support various forms of early childhood development, including parental visiting, parenting programs, family resource centres and child care. These programs typically are supported through social services as well as local and regional public health departments.

Community-based supports for families are essential to prevent problems and to encourage healthy development. These include high-quality affordable child care and local resource centres where parents can go for information about child development and family programs. Mom and tot playgroups offer important socialization opportunities for children and informal support for parents. Respite through formal services or informal means, such as babysitting co-operatives, can provide crucial occasional relief for caregivers. Toy- and book-lending libraries make available important resources for low-income families.

Community investment in children need not end at the preschool phase. The City of London, Ontario, for example, has worked in partnership with the federal and provincial governments as well as local school boards and other community organizations to address the health and learning needs of children. Individual neighbourhoods are encouraged to identify the key issues and concerns; current projects focus on safety, educational needs, school breakfast programs and family events [Lubell 1999].

Recreational opportunities for all children are another important area of municipal investment – not just in the early years but for all children, adolescents and their families. In fact, many crime prevention initiatives directed towards school-age children and teenagers employ various forms of recreation activity, including sports, arts, cultural events and drama – activities which also promote inclusion [Karoly et al. 1998].

Promoting Inclusion

The inclusion agenda is broad in scope and calls for a diverse range of actions by local governments. The first step in building an inclusive community is to ensure that all members are able to move freely and engage in its social, economic and cultural life [Torjman 2001].

Barrier-free design is the starting point for inclusion. This design is essential not only for persons with disabilities but for all community members. As the population ages, barrier-free design will become increasingly important. In fact, it should be the norm – not the exception. Ramps and curb cuts are helpful for seniors, for persons who need help walking and for caregivers pushing baby strollers. Low telephones can be accessed not only by persons in wheelchairs but also by young children.

But the lens of inclusion is concerned with more than physical entry. It also checks for the ability to pay. Do the events, programs and facilities allow participation by all?

Most local governments have introduced or raised user fees because of cash pressures they face as a result of increased responsibilities for services with no additional financing. These fees make it difficult for many residents to participate in recreational and cultural programs. Entry fees may prevent many families from partaking in community activities, such as arts festivals, music or sports events, or cultural celebrations, which keep people in touch with each other and reinforce important networks and associations. This exclusion is unfortunate, particularly in light of research findings that speak to the importance of recreation.

Recreation is emerging as crucial, not just for healthy individuals and families, but also for strong neighbourhoods. It is being understood increasingly as a central piece of the puzzle, particularly for families and children deemed to be at risk. Dr. Gina Browne and colleagues found that recreational services help psychologically disordered children on social assistance maintain their social, physical and academic competence at a level equal to that of a 'non-disordered' child. Without the services, children's competence levels actually drop.

Participation in sports, recreation and other leisure activities is essential for all children. These activities promote inclusion and are associated with an enhanced quality of life through the acquisition of new skills and improved physical and psychological well-being [Browne et al. 1998].

Local governments should review their user fee policies for all community facilities, events and programs to determine ways to reduce significantly and, ideally, remove these barriers to participation. Municipalities also can take specific actions in this area – e.g., allowing free or substantially reduced rates for public facilities during off-peak hours. A skating rink or municipal pool which is not used during certain times can be open to the public at no charge. The City of Ottawa, for instance, provides low-income residents with $150 worth of recreational programming every

year. Even with this subsidy, cost still can be a barrier for many families – especially for progressive skill development activities or programs that require special clothing or equipment.

Inclusion also involves engaging citizens in identifying key concerns and in contributing to the policy process. The City of Montreal, for example, has supported the development of 22 cross-sectoral joint-action committees in various boroughs. These committees provide input to the City and other agencies, such as *Centraide Montréal*, about local concerns and undertake specific projects to address these issues. Projects cover all aspects of local social development including the urban environment, socioeconomic conditions and community life. While the composition of these committees varies by neighbourhood, they generally bring together individual citizens, community organizations, the private sector and public officials.

But many members of the community – particularly low-income households – have not played an active role in the past and may not believe that they can make a meaningful contribution to this process. In other cases, the 'time deficit' makes it difficult for many individuals and families to squeeze volunteer or community work into their already full schedules. Still others cannot afford to participate in community discussions because of travel or child care costs.

Local governments should seek new ways to engage citizens in discussing the social issues that concern all families and neighbourhoods. Efforts should be made to involve young people and new Canadians, in particular, who often do not participate in (or get the opportunity to join) public discussions. The City of Calgary has prepared a guide to assist citizens in identifying the priority needs of their neighbourhoods and determining directions for action [City of Calgary 1997].

Local governments also can provide direct support to the local decision-making processes embodied by comprehensive community initiatives to reduce poverty. These supports include grants, free use of neighbourhood facilities, organization of community events, secondment of staff for certain activities and the provision of local information. The Regional Municipality of Niagara has lent staff support and committed funding to Opportunities Niagara, a local initiative that brings together diverse sectors of the community in a concerted effort to reduce poverty.

It is important to reduce barriers to participation – by providing, for example, supervised child care during public consultations or meetings, soup and sandwiches (for the children as well) if these meetings are held at or near meal time, or a small payment to cover travel and child care costs. The possibility of making translators available at designated meetings should be considered to encourage the participation of new Canadians or others who may require interpretation services, such as persons with hearing impairments.

In addition to reducing barriers to participation, there are several actions that local governments can take to build strong neighbourhoods, which are an important foundation for healthy children and families. Neighbours can be encouraged to make connections with each other so that

families feel rooted in a caring and supportive environment. Possible activities involve the creation of family resource centres, play groups and family reading circles. Other actions include the provision of support for community events such as cultural festivals, sports activities or theme days to help neighbours get to know one another and collaborate on common projects. Neighbours may work together to build a playground for children or organize a community clean-up to ensure a more healthy environment for all.

But it is not just local governments that can help build strong communities. Citizens themselves can teach each other how best to strengthen their social, economic and environmental fibre. The Pan-Canadian Learning Partnership within the Vibrant Communities project is a prototype of how communities across the country can promote common learning. Neighbourhoods within the same region can play this role and local governments can take the lead in supporting inter-neighbourhood learning.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of actions that local governments can take to reduce poverty. The real challenge is to determine the areas in which they are best placed to make a difference in a particular region and to prioritize the range of interventions in which they plan to become involved. In fact, their challenge is shared by comprehensive community initiatives more generally: the need to select key points of leverage among the wide range of possible options. It is both a difficult and delicate balancing act.

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