CALEDON

INSTITUTE OF
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Comprehensive Community Initiatives

by

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Context

This paper explores the emerging theory and practice on comprehensive community initiatives. It is one of a series of papers written in support of the Vibrant Communities project, which has embraced the comprehensive community initiatives approach.

Vibrant Communities is a four-year national effort to explore promising local solutions to reduce poverty. The project is 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 than 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 initiative 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 civil society, including voluntary organizations.

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.*'

The Concept

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) 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 draw on the "accumulating evidence that services meant to improve the life prospects of the poor were often proving ineffective – at least in part because they were so fragmented" [Schorr 1997: 315]. They also give greater recognition to the growing body of social research that points to the role which community conditions, sometimes called 'neighbourhood effects,' play in perpetuating or reducing poverty [Schorr 1997: 306]. Through comprehensive community initiatives, a wide range of promising practices is being reworked into a new weave of strategies and policies.

> The new synthesis rejects addressing poverty, welfare, employment, education, child development, housing and crime one at a time. It endorses the idea that the multiple and interrelated problems of poor neighbourhoods require multiple and interrelated solutions… [Its proponents] insist on combining physical and economic development with service and education reform, and all of these with a commitment to building community institutions and social networks [Schorr 1997: 319].

As this description suggests, comprehensive community initiatives pursue an ambitious set of goals:

> These goals go well beyond the remediation of particular problems, such as teenage pregnancy or insufficient income, or the development of particular assets, such as housing stock or new social services. CCIs attempt instead to foster a fundamental transformation of poor neighborhoods and to catalyze a process of sustained improvement in the circumstances and opportunities of individuals and families in those neighborhoods. They seek, furthermore, to change the nature of the relationship between the neighborhood and the systems outside its boundaries by ensuring that change is locally grounded but also draws upon external sources of knowledge and resources. Thus, CCIs set out to promote change at three levels: the individual or family, the neighborhood and the broader, or system-level, context [Aspen Institute 1997: 1.2].

The Aspen Institute is one of the key US-based organizations exploring the concept of comprehensive community initiatives. In 1992, it established the Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives to serve as a forum in which people engaged in this work across the US – as funders, community organizers, technical assistance providers, evaluators or policy-makers – could meet to identify lessons learned and to tackle common problems.

The Aspen Institute defines these initiatives as neighbourhood-based efforts that seek improved outcomes for individuals and families as well as improvements in neighbourhood conditions by working comprehensively across social and economic sectors. Additionally, CCIs operate on the principle that community building is a necessary component of the process of transforming distressed neighbourhoods. Community building includes, for example, strengthening institutional capacity at the local level, enhancing social capital and personal networks, and developing local leadership capacity.

The Canadian body of experience with comprehensive community initiatives is younger than that of the United States. In the US, experimentation with these types of efforts has been taking place since the early 1990s. Largely through the support of private foundations such as the Ford

Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, among others, a wide range of projects has been undertaken and employed as the basis for learning.

Here at home, we are learning about these initiatives from both the American experience and our own work 'on the ground' in communities across Canada. We are only beginning to understand the various dimensions of this approach to community work. One of the most important lessons to date is that there is still so much to learn.

Key Features

There are several key features that distinguish comprehensive community initiatives from other types of community efforts that focus on a single issue or are undertaken by a single organization. CCIs are comprehensive. They are holistic, developmental and long-term. They are multisectoral and seek to be inclusive. They are concerned with both process and outcomes. Each of these features is discussed more fully below.

They are comprehensive

Comprehensive community initiatives are just that. They seek to be broad in scope and address a range of areas rather than a single concern. They usually select an 'umbrella' issue, theme or population as their broad focus. They then determine, in collaboration with key players in the community, the wide set of interconnected projects and efforts that fall within the domain of that overarching issue, theme or population. In addition, as noted, comprehensive community initiatives seek to intervene at different levels – e.g., individual and family, neighbourhood or community, and the 'systems' level or broader social and economic context.

Many communities throughout the country are concerned, for example, with enhancing quality of life. Other initiatives focus more explicitly upon the reduction of poverty. Still other efforts select a population and its issues, such as children and families, seniors or Aboriginal Canadians. Community initiatives are well positioned to understand the unique experience of different groups and to design responses tailored to their circumstances.

At the household level, comprehensive community initiatives seek to create opportunities for individuals and families to improve their lives in many different ways. Various projects may be undertaken to ensure access to nutritious food, provide training that will help lead to decent employment or promote access to high-quality, affordable child care.

But CCIs typically move beyond the provision of services, amenities or supports to individuals or households. They also seek to create new or improve existing assets in a neighbourhood or community to help build its physical and/or social infrastructure. The efforts may focus, for example, upon improving the stock of decent affordable housing, setting up new educational or training programs, and creating or expanding recreational or cultural programs. In all cases, these amenities enhance the quality of the neighbourhood or community.

CCIs are also concerned with fostering a neighbourhood or community's capacity to solve its problems – such as high rates of child abuse, crime or unemployment. They seek to build this problem-solving capacity by creating or sustaining networks (or social capital) that serve as an important base for making local decisions. Often the focus of these discussions goes beyond the resolution of problems and considers various means of improving local areas through expanding economic opportunity or 'greening' the environment.

Finally, comprehensive community initiatives seek to make changes to the broader social and economic context. They recognize that local efforts can go only so far in terms of what they can accomplish in helping to improve the quality of life. Much of the required action goes beyond the scope that local efforts themselves are able to achieve. The policy work that the Caledon Institute has undertaken in relation to local community initiatives is an attempt to work at a broader contextual level.

We were involved, for instance, with Opportunities 2000 (OP2000), a community-based poverty reduction initiative in Waterloo Region. It had been spearheaded by a local nonprofit group, the Lutherwood Community Opportunities Development Association (CODA). The program worked at the individual and family level through skills training and development. It worked as well at the neighbourhood and community level by trying to ensure the presence of adequate job opportunities; it encouraged self-employment through community loan funds and set up local enterprises in order to ensure access to jobs [Hodgson 1999; Hodgson and Torjman 1998].

But the project also recognized that changes were required in the broader context to have a more long-lasting and fundamental impact upon people's lives. One way to effect contextual change is through the modification of existing or the introduction of new policies.

OP2000 program participants, for example, may have succeeded in their efforts to improve their education and upgrade their skills. They also may have been able to move off welfare and into paid employment. But they would have found in taking a full-time job (if, indeed, it were available) that they suddenly faced new stresses. They likely would be working, for example, at fairly low wages. They would have to pay income taxes on their very modest salaries as well as payroll taxes.

In order to bring attention to this problem, the Caledon Institute wrote a commentary entitled *More Money in the Pocket* [Battle and Torjman 1999]. It focused upon both the tax burden resulting

from income and payroll taxes, combined with the relatively low taxpaying threshold for low-income workers. This commentary was directed at the federal government. The paper pointed out that, in 1999, Canadians started paying income taxes at a very low level – just $7,373 for a single person. Moreover, the taxpaying threshold actually had been falling and income taxes rising over the years because of an insidious problem known as 'partial indexation.' In the 2000 Budget, the federal government announced the full re-indexation of the income tax system.

In another example of contextual work, but at a different level, the Caledon Institute wrote *Strategies for a Caring Society*: *The Local Government Role* [Torjman 1999b]. The purpose of this paper was to encourage local governments in the region to examine their own policies and practices to determine the extent to which barriers to self-sufficiency in the areas of welfare, housing and transportation were embedded within the system. It also discussed the positive steps that local governments can take to build a more caring community. In fact, the City of Waterloo used this paper as a guide to review its own policies.

They are holistic

Comprehensive community initiatives seek to break down the artificial boundaries of compartmentalization which characterize the way that governments and communities generally tackle various social and economic issues.

Both governments and community agencies appear to have limited capacity to address issues in holistic and preventive ways. Governments, in particular, are organized to deal with human problems as if these can be segregated into distinct social, health, education and economic needs. Most public spending is directed towards a component of a particular issue or the alleviation of crisis in the form of remedial intervention after a problem has occurred.

Comprehensive community initiatives, by contrast, try to identify the links among various issues. They then engage diverse sectors to tackle the complexities involved in the social, economic and environmental challenges the community seeks to address.

They are multisectoral

Comprehensive community initiatives encourage partnering and collaborative work arrangements. They recognize the value of contributions from diverse backgrounds, networks and areas of expertise. Collaborative relationships create new value by bringing additional resources, insights and expertise to the table.

Multisectoral collaboration is important not only from the perspective of resources and solutions. In this case, the 'medium is also the message': Problems such as unemployment, poverty and family violence are the concern of the entire community – not simply of governments or the social sector. All sectors – including governments, social services, business, labour, educational institutions and anti-poverty groups – are responsible for addressing the identified issues, preferably through a planned and coordinated approach that combines resources and expertise in innovative ways.

Typically, comprehensive community initiatives are governed by a coordinating mechanism in the form of a leadership roundtable or steering group. The coordinating body is at least multi-organizational and, at best, multisectoral in composition. It assumes responsibility for acting as champion of the issue, convening key players, setting out a clear vision for the effort and associated strategic plan, and acting as the liaison between the broader community (including the media) and the comprehensive initiative.

The Jobs Initiative exemplifies the comprehensive, multisectoral approach applied to the challenge of labour force development. Launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 1995, the Jobs Initiative is an eight-year demonstration project designed to improve access to family-support-ing 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, Seltzer and Taylor 2001].

The planning phase from 1995 to 1997 focused upon convening 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.

Following the planning phase, the sites undertook a three-year capacity-building phase to institute the organizational structure and other mechanisms required to implement their planned job projects. Each site also was expected to put together a Jobs Policy Network to begin developing the site's policy agenda.

Finally, the implementation phase is expected to last four years. During this period, the sites will engage in a series of activities to advocate for institutional change and systems reform.

They are long-term

Comprehensive community initiatives recognize that complex issues cannot be resolved in the short term. It takes time to establish relationships among the various sectors and work effectively in a collaborative fashion. Neither is it easy to build trust among organizations that have not even talked to each other in the past, let alone worked together to achieve a common goal.

Governments typically operate within limited and narrow time frames that cannot be met from the perspective of a true process of community development – especially those efforts that address complex and multifaceted issues like poverty reduction, unemployment, affordable housing, food security, crime prevention and ecological sustainability. These issues do not magically take life on fiscal year April 1 and end on March 31.

Comprehensive community initiatives are not tied to political tides. They set their pace by the rhythm of communities. For example, the Core Neighbourhood Development Council in Saskatoon has initiated a community planning process that is setting its sights 20 years into the future. The community organizations leading this effort recognize that the web of challenges facing Saskatoon's inner-city neighbourhoods developed over many years and will not be untangled overnight. They know that it will take years of sustained and committed effort on behalf of local residents to gradually bring about the desired change. Assistance from outside sources, such as government, charitable foundations or corporations, needs to be geared to a similar time frame for tackling the wide range of concerns.

They are developmental

A major principle that underlies comprehensive community initiatives is that they are not simply remedial interventions which seek to reduce or compensate for identified problems. Rather, these efforts aim to build the capacity of the community in a positive way from the perspective of decision-making and resilience.

Decision-making capacity is important in that it can apply to a wide range of issues and not just the one area that has been identified as the focus of the work. Resilience is crucial because it helps the community withstand the stresses and strains that inevitably arise from economic, social, environmental or political pressures.

In its Community Resilience Manual, the Centre for Community Enterprise identifies 23 features of communities that are associated with resilience. These factors include the outlook of its citizens, the quality of their relations and the availability of financial and organizational resources.

It describes a process through which a community can assess its vitality in respect of these features and take intentional action to enhance its capacity to meet the challenge of change on an ongoing basis [Colussi, Lewis and Rowcliffe 2000].

Another important feature of comprehensive community initiatives is that they focus on the assets and resources embedded in communities. These approaches tend not to view a community from the lens of its weaknesses. Instead, they affirm its strengths and build on these 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 embedded strengths of communities – their natural assets as well as their citizens and institutions [Kretzmann and McKnight 1993].

They are inclusive

Comprehensive community initiatives seek to be comprehensive not just from the perspective of the issues they seek to address. They also try to be inclusive with respect to the members they involve. CCIs typically include diverse sectors as well as groups, such as people living in poverty, youth, Aboriginal Canadians and members of racial minorities. Whether or not these individuals must be formal representatives from designated groups and organizations is an unresolved issue, discussed below.

There are two distinct challenges associated with creating a broad-based inclusive community response to poverty. One involves engaging the diverse sectors of the community that can make a contribution to poverty reduction. The other entails building relationships among these 'partners,' many of whom may not have worked together closely in the past and may even have a history of conflict and distrust.

In both cases, local convenors play a crucial role in mobilizing the community around the goal of poverty reduction. Convenors must have a good understanding of poverty and a commitment to poverty reduction, credibility in the eyes of diverse segments of the community and a capacity to speak to the perspectives and concerns of different participants.

While each sector requires appropriate support to enable its distinct contribution to poverty reduction, comprehensive community initiatives place special emphasis on ensuring that low-income residents have the opportunity to participate in shaping the solutions meant to address their needs. CCIs have experimented with various methods to accomplish this goal – e.g., including low-income residents on multisectoral governing bodies, creating special advisory councils of low-income residents, investing in substantial outreach and organizing efforts focused on low-income residents and hiring these individuals to undertake various components of the initiative's work.

There are many challenges associated with ensuring that low-income residents are included as meaningful participants in community-based poverty reduction processes. One such challenge involves recognizing and addressing the diverse realities of people living on low income. Not only are there numerous sub-populations among low-income residents – e.g., homeless youth, seniors on fixed incomes, recent immigrants, single-parent households with each facing a different set of circumstances – but there are also different levels of poverty to take into account. For instance, one schema identifies five sub-groups based on the extent of the barriers they face – e.g., the working poor, the unemployed, the persistently unemployed, the dependent poor and the indigent [O'Regan and Conway 1993: 6-9].

Convenors must be conscious of this diversity and attentive to which of the many voices are being heard and which are not. Although community organizing has a long history, it is an underdeveloped aspect of the work done by many community agencies. In part, this underdevelopment reflects one of the 'divides' that comprehensive initiatives seek to overcome – between the field of human services and the field of community organizing.

The lack of involvement of community residents also reflects the fact that many funders are more interested in investing in the direct delivery of programs and services than in the seemingly less tangible work of community organizing. Recognizing this, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Re-building Communities Initiative invested substantial time and resources to help community-based organizations make the cultural shift from service delivery to resident organizing and to developing the skills associated with this work [Traynor 2002].

The inclusion of low-income residents as full participants in governing community-based poverty reduction initiatives involves numerous other obstacles. Faced with more immediate personal concerns, low-income residents may not have the time or energy to engage in a broader community initiative. Even if they do wish to contribute, the hardships and stresses of living in poverty may make it impossible for them to participate on a consistent basis. Logistical factors such as transportation and child care requirements also need to be addressed.

Then there are a myriad of factors that discourage participation: doubts that participating will lead to any positive changes, previous experiences with consultation processes and studies in which the input offered ultimately was ignored, discomfort about participating in formal meetings, and concerns about expressing criticisms about existing programs and services to people in positions of power and authority.

In order to effectively address these challenges, comprehensive community initiatives must make broad social inclusion a priority both in terms of committed resources and as a focus of ongoing learning and improvement.

They are concerned with process and outcome

Comprehensive community initiatives must have a sense of what they are seeking to achieve. They must set clear goals, carefully track their work and try to the best of their ability to reach their designated targets.

But the process by which these goals are reached is equally important. The real value-added of comprehensive community initiatives is to establish effective structures that can enable the community to reduce poverty, change policy and introduce innovation. They help build the capacity of the community to solve problems and take concrete steps toward improving its economic, social and environmental well-being. In fact, improved process may be a major outcome of the community effort. The Aspen Institute draws the following lessons from early work in this area:

> CCIs seek to build capacity and improve the quality of life of individual neighborhood residents and their families. They aim to increase both the quality and quantity of activities designed to improve educational outcomes, employment, and the health and well-being of neighborhood residents. At the same time, CCIs place priority on strengthening the personal, political or 'process' skills that enable people to motivate and lead their peers. They recognize that their neighborhoods need both types of individual development, and deliberately build both into the agenda [Aspen Institute 1997: 1.2].

Aspen also points out:

> A core lesson that emerges from the current CCIs is that both process and product are critical, that one without the other will not achieve the desired goals at the individual/family, neighborhood and systems levels. Attempting to balance the two to achieve initiative goals, however, is no easy task and creates a fundamental tension. If an initiative's only goals were to produce houses, deliver or create jobs, this tension would hardly exist. Likewise, it would also be less prominent if, conversely, the initiative aimed only to strengthen social networks or enhance the participatory development process. But a distinguishing feature of CCIs is that, in addition to seeking improvements in the lives of individuals and in neighbourhoods, they also place value upon the process of change and, in particular, on ensuring that capacity building occurs at the same time as program activities [Aspen Institute 1997: 2.3].

Key Challenges

Comprehensive community initiatives hold out great hope for tackling complex social, economic and environmental issues. But CCIs themselves come with their own set of unique challenges, which we are only beginning to understand. A few of these challenges are identified here: the meaning of the terms 'comprehensive,' 'community' and 'inclusive;' strategies for building and maintaining momentum and for sustaining leadership; the resourcing of initiatives; evaluating their work; and clarity about the roles and limits of community action.

The meaning of 'comprehensive'

There are questions as to what is meant by the term 'comprehensive.' Poverty reduction, for example, typically is identified as one of the major concerns which comprehensive initiatives seek to address. But what if a community is involved in only one dimension of poverty reduction – such as food security or affordable housing – even though it embodies other relevant features such as multisectoral collaboration and long-term perspective? Would its efforts be considered within the family of comprehensive community initiatives?

Three basic approaches appear to have emerged from recent efforts to operate in a comprehensive mode: mounting an initiative that is comprehensive from the outset, using a strategic driver to focus the activities and starting with one type of program and adding others as the initiative or the organization matures. Some communities combine these approaches, as each is appropriate at different phases of the work [Kubisch et al. 2002: 22].

In a similar vein, what if a community set out to tackle all the challenges related to the early years but involved only one sector (i.e., the social sector) rather than business, labour and other groups? Would this effort still be identified as a comprehensive community initiative if it did not assume a multisectoral approach but fit the bill along the other dimensions?

These questions basically are asking whether a given effort must demonstrate all the key features or just some of them in order to be judged a comprehensive community initiative. One could answer this question with another question: Does it matter? Perhaps it is not really important to spend time splitting hairs over this issue. On the other hand, if we are billing these efforts as new and innovative approaches that are different from those tried in the past, maybe it is essential to be more precise about what this term means and more careful about the dimensions that fall within the conceptual tent.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are both strengths and weaknesses embedded in a comprehensive approach. A broad strategy effectively seeks to make and address the links among key areas. It recognizes, for example, that a training program to help social assistance recipients move from welfare to paid employment likely will not be successful unless they have access to affordable child care. It is difficult for program participants to concentrate on their studies or training if they happen to be facing eviction. A program to encourage the workforce participation of persons with disabilities must accommodate their special needs.

Comprehensive strategies recognize these links. They seek to tackle the issues that often lie at the interface of several fields such as child development, health, education, training, employment and income security. But while comprehensive community initiatives may recognize these interrelationships, they easily can become overwhelmed by the scope of issues that they know ideally should be addressed.

Community efforts typically are limited in their budgets and resources. They realistically can achieve only so much. The challenge is to find the balance between a broad definition of the issue and a relatively targeted strategy to tackle its various elements. This selective approach does not mean that the other areas must be ignored. What it does mean is that the community must identify clearly the issue(s) around which it feels it can have an impact.

A community also may choose to work on a concern around which it knows it already has made some headway. The importance of achieving small successes should not be underestimated. For example, it is possible that the community already has rallied around an issue such as child poverty, early childhood development, the settlement of new Canadians or racial tolerance. In this case, the community may decide to build on its existing strengths and expertise. It can tackle the broader set of issues by focusing in the first instance upon areas in which it already can claim some success.

In some cases, communities select an opportunity-driven approach. This means that there already is some actual or potential investment – e.g., a private donor may wish to support local entrepreneurs, the province may direct substantial resources towards early childhood development or the federal government may have made available funds for local solutions to homelessness as it did under the Supporting Partnerships Community Initiatives.

The community also could decide that it will develop a broad overarching strategy with several steps along the way. It may set long-term goals with clear intermediate actions. For example, it first will tackle the problem of affordable child care before it seeks to create new training programs. It may establish a community loan fund before it begins training for self-employment.

The important factor is not that these initiatives tackle all the interrelated issues at once. In fact, that approach would be unworkable. The defining factor is that they are rooted in comprehensive *analysis*, which leads, in turn, to strategic action.

The meaning of 'community'

Another challenge with which these initiatives grapple is the age-old question of 'community.' To what does this term refer: neighbourhood, larger geographic region or group with similar features or interests? Can it be all of the above?

The answer may be that there is no single answer. It simply may be best to employ a loose definition of community so that local groups can figure out for themselves what it means in their respective context. In some cases, they may be referring only to a clearly defined neighbourhood whose geographic boundaries are well delineated. In other projects, the term community might be used to reflect or parallel the territory relevant to the local government. In this instance, community

might comprise a set of amalgamated cities. Still other efforts may wish to focus upon a community of interest, such as a visible minority community or persons with disabilities.

In the US, most comprehensive community initiatives operate at the neighbourhood level. In Canada, Vibrant Communities is experimenting with initiatives in a range of settings, including inner-city neighbourhoods, small cities and major metropolitan centres.

What may be more important than population size or geography is whether a group of people shares a sense of working together for the common good. Communities in this sense may come in many different shapes and sizes. Perhaps it is best not too define this term too narrowly but to let it be defined by the groups involved in these initiatives. They can then adapt and shape it to their needs as required.

The meaning of 'inclusive'

One of the most complex challenge arises from the meaning of 'inclusive.' How best to make decisions as to which sectors, groups and individuals to include in a comprehensive community initiative? How do we know when an effort is inclusive? Must it reflect or even mirror the demographic basis of the community? Or should the concept of inclusion be employed more as a conceptual lens? Furthermore, what level of participation is appropriate to seek from those who are involved? Must all participants be engaged in every aspect of the work? Are there critical activities and junctures for the involvement of the wider community as opposed to a more limited set of partners?

Equally difficult are the questions as to who gets invited to the overall coordinating mechanism – i.e., the key decision-making table for the effort. Is it an open table? Should it be? Are participants at the table there as individual citizens who have extensive knowledge and networks or are they there as formal delegates or representatives of their respective organizations? Must they wear a particular hat? Can they wear many hats? Can they wear no hat? Hats off to anyone who easily can answer these questions. The answer is that there is no definitive or single correct response. Every community will find its own answers to the challenge of inclusion. At the very least, however, it should be trying to address this issue.

Theories of change

Community practitioners typically have a strong intuitive understanding of what measures must be taken to address the challenges in their communities. However, they often lack the time,

inclination and skills to articulate the links they see between the strategies they propose and the outcomes they seek. In the absence of well-articulated theories of change, it becomes more difficult for initiatives to maintain their strategic direction, learn from their own experiments and build on one another's experiences.

Evaluators and researchers have an important role to play in building the body of knowledge that can inform the efforts of community practitioners. Two-way learning between researchers and practitioners can enhance the selection of strategies community initiatives pursue: "Systematic collections of theories of change illuminate what is worth doing, shed light on promising ways to sequence change efforts, can suggest what is not worth doing, and help participants inject 'intentionality' and purpose into their activities" [Schorr 1997: 364].

Based on previous experience, a wide range of "plausible theories of change" already can be identified to help community initiatives formulate carefully their strategies [Schorr 1997: 364]. For example, one CCI director described the theory of change behind his initiative in the following way: "I've really come to believe that jobs are the key, and that everything we do has to be organized around pathways to work – pathways that start as far back as prenatal care and school readiness, but that ultimately connect up with increasing the number of young adults that are productively employed" [Schorr 1997: 364].

Other theories of change may focus on community-building activities:

> When residents of depleted neighborhoods undertake activities that perceptibly change the conditions of their lives (getting a new traffic light installed or closing down the hated trash-transfer stations) they gain a sense of increased 'intentionality,' the conviction that they can change the course of their lives by their own efforts. That sense increases their effectiveness as parents, helps them support their children's efforts to succeed at school, and is more likely to make them part of informal social networks that build social capital [Schorr 1997: 365].

Still other theories of change may identify the strategic importance of addressing the needs of adolescents or creating safe communities – whatever the entry point, it strengthens local initiatives and the field as a whole to be able to test, document, revise and build upon explicit insights about how this work can be pursued. More attention must be paid to linking action, research and learning in these local efforts.

Sources of support

Comprehensive community initiatives face a major challenge in trying to find sufficient support to help them get established and to sustain their work over the long term. As noted, the strength of these arrangements is that they are indeed long-term efforts – but that fact creates a challenge in finding sufficient funds for their support.

Most of these efforts have been supported to date by private foundations. CCIs are generally foundation-sponsored initiatives. Grant funds are meant to be flexible and responsive to the priorities established by the local governance structure. Typically, however, funds directed towards CCIs do not cover ongoing program costs, but are used instead for planning and management, capacity building and seed funding for new activities [Aspen Institute 1997: 1.5].

In the US, for example, comprehensive community initiatives have received long-term support from private organizations, such as the Ford Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In Canada, the Vibrant Communities project is receiving support for its decision-making capacity through the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the Maytree Foundation. Human Resources Development Canada is contributing to the policy component of the work.

OP2000 sought private contributions for the leadership roundtable and visioning process in the community. It knew that government funds were primarily project-focused and would not be available for the support of long-term community building. The project was able to raise $1 million in private and community funds before approaching governments for project-specific assistance.

In some communities, local governments have played an important role in providing core support for community decision-making processes. The multisectoral Partners for Jobs initiated by the Mayor of Ottawa was supported by City staff and funds during the critical initial (18-month) phase. The City of Hamilton provided staff support and funds for the development of a Social Vision that was spearheaded and managed by a broadly based community group [Torjman, Leviten-Reid and Heisler 2002].

But government funds typically are not available for this purpose. The problem is that federal government funds tend to flow primarily to projects rather than to community infrastructure that supports problem-solving capacity. The problem-solving process is not necessarily results-oriented in the short term; it is concerned more with identifying and convening key players. It therefore typically does not meet government criteria, which generally are short-term (usually set out over the course of a given fiscal year with the work to be completed by the end of that year), and 'results based' with expectations for almost immediate, quantifiable outcomes.

A recent exception is the funding provided through a program called the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), which is administered by Human Resources Development Canada. The program was announced in 1999 as part of the federal housing strategy and in response to growing pressure for action on homelessness. The political architecture created by the program relies on private and public partnerships at the local level. Modest funds for tackling homelessness were granted to cities that qualified on the basis of population size, extent of poverty and average rental vacancy rates for 1998 and 1999. While the agreement focused initially on the top ten cities that met these criteria, the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) has since been applied more broadly. As SCPI entered its third year, at least 61 communities had come together to develop comprehensive plans for tackling homelessness.

The funds provided to communities are modest but are not intended for the construction of new housing. Rather, they are meant to enable the decision-making processes that convene the key community players and support their ability to create a community plan on homelessness. The plans must include both long-term vision as well as specific short-term strategies for moving in that direction. The advantage of this approach is that it allows the federal government to assume a leadership role in working with partners to generate local solutions to homelessness. The SCPI experience is instructive in that it started with a handful of selected municipalities and grew exponentially in a short period of time.

Comprehensive community initiatives hold out the prospect of creating well-integrated, long-term strategies customized to local needs. But they must be complemented by efforts on the part of governments to join in local planning processes, engage in interdepartmental and intergovernmental coordination, and enter into longer-term funding agreements.

Building momentum

Comprehensive community initiatives typically define themselves in terms of broad goals and a long-term vision. While these goals are crucial for charting the scope of the work, they must be balanced by shorter-term targets and concrete initiatives which provide tangible indications that progress is being made. Such interim targets are needed to generate the momentum to sustain participation and attract additional partners. The challenge for communities is to find the right combination of strategic vision and short-term actions. Without interim measures, the vision never will be achieved; without the vision, the immediate actions may serve little real purpose.

The challenge of generating and maintaining momentum also is reflected in the balance that comprehensive community initiatives must strike between planning and action. In a study conducted with leaders of these efforts in the US, most interviewees warned against initial comprehensive planning without quick, tangible results. In the words of one administrator: "CCI's must plan and do simultaneously. Don't wait for that comprehensive planning moment when everything comes together, but rather find workable points of entry into even the most significant problems" [Gray, Duran and Segal 1997: 8-9].

In order to maintain momentum, comprehensive community initiatives must pursue issues and concerns that resonate with the lived reality of local residents [Gray, Duran and Segal 1997: 8]. At the same time, these approaches must maintain a longer-term, strategic vision so as not to be overwhelmed by the myriad immediate concerns that confront impoverished communities.

Sustaining leadership

Strong leadership is a critical ingredient for the success of comprehensive community initiatives. Individual champions are often crucial for inspiring support for these local efforts and maintaining commitment during difficult periods.

At the same time, leadership of these initiatives involves many sensitivities, careful judgment and a wide range of skills. A team of leaders usually is needed to effectively address the myriad challenges that typically arise. Moreover, such initiatives generally require a continuous injection of energy from their leaders. Leadership development strategies help ensure that current leaders have opportunities for renewal and that emerging leaders have occasion to develop their skills and experience.

Evaluating comprehensive community initiatives

Comprehensive community initiatives pose many challenges for evaluation. The goals and strategies of the projects may change considerably as initiatives respond to the dynamics of their respective communities. Synergies fostered among different sectors and levels of activity (e.g., individual, family, community and government) are difficult to track. Key outcomes, such as community capacity-building and systems change, typically lack agreed-upon definitions and measures. The ideas behind the design of projects are often unspecified, making it difficult to assess the validity of the theories upon which they are based. Finally, because the sheer scope of such initiatives goes well beyond the average community project, it is easy to underestimate the resources required for evaluation [Kubisch et al. 1995: 2-3].

Due to the double focus on both process and outcomes, there is no question that the evaluation of these initiatives is far more complex than that involved in a single project. First, it is essential to identify indicators of success at both the process and outcome levels. Outcome indicators may include, for example, an increase in the numbers of persons who found paid employment or in the households that moved out of poverty. Process indicators, by contrast, may try to capture the shifts that occurred in the community as a result of the effort. These could include, for instance, the creation of new partnerships between and among organizations that had not worked together in the past, the secondment of staff and other resources to the initiative, or a review by local government or private business of their respective policies and practices.

Another difficulty arises around attribution. With so many interactions taking place at so many different levels (individual/family, neighbourhood/community and broader context), it often is impossible to determine which interventions generated the identified changes. A community effort

is also subject to external influences that are impossible to control. A training program set up as part of a comprehensive community initiative, for example, may be highly successful in terms of its own results and its ability to place participants in paid employment. But a slight overall rise in the unemployment rate in the region or the country might completely negate the positive impact of the specific program.

Finally, evaluation usually is undertaken for the purpose of determining whether certain interventions worked or not – whether they were positive or negative with respect to their intended results. The pervasive concern with "what works?" helps drive this obsession. While this information is important, it may not be the most critical. Perhaps the central question that should be asked is not so much what works, but rather what did we learn from this work? What appears to have been a successful intervention and why? What factors contributed to its success? Why did certain interventions appear not to work effectively? What could have been done differently to ensure a more positive result?

Moreover, evaluations typically begin after the key foundations of a project have been laid and the work is already well under way. It would be far more helpful to have feedback about performance on an ongoing basis so that interventions which appear to be less than effective might be identified and shifted. Or perhaps the process by which a program has been set up is not operating appropriately or is far more problematic than originally intended. It would be important to know this information earlier rather than later in the process.

In the first phase of Opportunities 2000, substantial attention was focused upon tracking one key outcome – the movement of 2,000 households out of poverty by the end of the year 2000. The key evaluation tool for measuring progress in achieving this outcome was a household survey to be completed by low-income participants when they entered their particular poverty reduction project and again when the project ended. Substantial time and effort were spent trying to design and implement the survey so as to collect the income data needed to assess the progress of participants in moving above Statistics Canada's low income cut-offs.

This investment in the survey diverted limited evaluation resources away from efforts to understand the dynamics, strengths and weaknesses of the various strategies employed in the project. Ultimately, a drastically scaled-down survey was used to obtain some basic information about income changes. It then was coupled with interviews and focus groups so as to obtain a well-rounded picture about the initiative's different projects and the variety of outcomes they achieved [Leviten-Reid 2001; Torjman 1999a].

In short, the focus of the evaluation needs to shift from one of judgment to one of learning. It also needs to evolve from an after-the-fact black or white judgment to ongoing feedback about the gray areas – reflecting the complexity of the processes represented by these comprehensive community initiatives.

The limitations of community

The concept of comprehensive community initiatives is so compelling and attractive that this strength has itself become something of a problem. Both community practitioners and policy-makers can fall prey to thinking that a mobilized community can tackle the problems it faces entirely on its own. While communities do, indeed, have tools at their disposal for countering poverty and other serious challenges, there are also structural dimensions to these problems that communities cannot resolve. As the Aspen Institute points out in its most recent review of lessons arising from the American experience with these initiatives: "The means for solving poor neighborhoods' problems lie only partially within communities' boundaries, and expectations for the outcomes of community-based change must reflect that reality" [Kubisch et al. 2002: 3].

In addition to fully developing their ability to affect whatever changes are within their own control, communities must be able to "use interactions with structures, resources and other influences *beyond their boundaries* to the maximum advantage of the community. This means that community-change efforts must develop more sophisticated analyses of political, economic and social dynamics and find better ways to tap into them, benefit from them, make demands on them, and improve their operations in distressed communities" [Kubisch et al. 2002: 3-4].

Another way of saying this is that structures beyond communities – notably governments and business – need to understand the strengths and limitations of local process, and take appropriate measures to complement these efforts.

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