Vibrant Communities 2002-2010
Evaluation Report

imprint inc.

TAMARACK
An Institute for Community Engagement

CALEDON
INSTITUTE OF
SOCIAL POLICY

THE J.W. McCONNELL
FAMILY FOUNDATION

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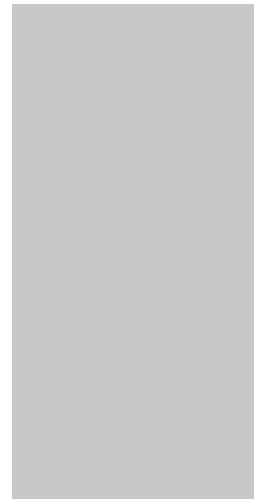
Vibrant
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Vibrant COMMUNITIES
CANADA

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of any of the organizations that contribute resources to the Vibrant Communities initiative.

Publisher's note:
The Vibrant Communities (VC) campaign, which began in 2002, was mandated by its three sponsors – Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation – to perform an end-of-campaign evaluation, in two phases:

Phase one – (December 2009 to July 2010) – identifying the questions VC stakeholders wished to see addressed in the final evaluation and forming initial conclusions based on data and studies resulting from the work of Vibrant Communities.

Phase two – (July 2010 to Spring 2011) – deepening the understanding of phase one conclusions and incorporating additional data collection and analysis.

This paper is an initial report focusing on the findings of phase one of the end-of-campaign evaluation.

For further information on Vibrant Communities visit the VC website at www.vibrantcommunities.ca or read the VC book, *Creating Vibrant Communities: How Individuals and Organizations from Diverse Sectors of Society Are Coming Together to Reduce Poverty in Canada* (for details see http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2_books2.html).

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Introduction

Vibrant Communities (VC) is a pan-Canadian initiative through which 13 communities have experimented with new and innovative approaches to poverty reduction. These approaches emphasize collaboration across sectors, comprehensive thinking and action, building on community assets, and a long-term process of learning and change.

Launched in 2002, Vibrant Communities builds on learning generated by Opportunities 2000, an initiative operating in the Kitchener-Waterloo region of Ontario in the mid-to-late 1990s that showed how communities can expand their capacity for strategic poverty reduction work. VC was established through the partnership of three national sponsors – Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation – and a series of local communities across the country. As it evolved, VC gained the support of a number of other funding partners, including the Maytree Foundation, the Hamilton Community Foundation – the Young Fund, RBC Financial Group, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and Human Resources and Social Development Canada.

A Clearing in the Forest

This report represents a clearing in the forest for Vibrant Communities – a time and space from which those involved at any level of the vision and work can:

- Assess the VC experience thus far
- Determine the gains that have been made in poverty reduction, in the thinking of the leaders and participants involved, and in community engagement
- Look ahead to phase two of the end-of-campaign evaluation

The end-of-campaign evaluation was mandated by the three main sponsors and was designed to unfold in two phases:

> **Phase one** (December 2009 to July 2010) – identifying the questions that Vibrant Communities stakeholders wished to see addressed in the evaluation; forming initial conclusions based on the large volume of already existing VC data (e.g., statistics, case studies, reports); and determining questions for phase two.
>
> **Phase two** (July 2010 to Spring 2011) – deepening the understanding of phase one conclusions with additional data collection and analysis and addressing new questions generated through phase one of the evaluation.

The conclusions presented in this report were developed and refined through a user-oriented process. Priority questions were identified in consultation with internal and external stakeholders.

Key representatives from the participating communities and national sponsors have participated in a process of analysis and interpretation facilitated and supported by an external, independent evaluator.

Although local Vibrant Communities partners may continue their work indefinitely, depending on on-the-ground needs and aspirations, the initiative designed as a formal research project will be completed at the end of 2011.

This paper is an initial report on the end-of-campaign evaluation process. The final report, after the completion of phase two, will sum up the outcomes and lessons that have emerged.

The remainder of this introduction provides:

- An overview of the Vibrant Communities initiative from the point of view of its complexity and the challenges posed to the evaluation process
- A preview of the content of this report

The Vibrant Communities Initiative: An Overview

The first six communities, sometimes referred to as the Trail Builders, began their work in 2002. They are:

- The Quality of Living Challenge (B.C. Capital Region)
- Opportunities Niagara
- Vibrant Communities Saint John
- Le Chantier in Saint-Michel (Montreal)
- Vibrant Communities Edmonton
- Vibrant Communities Calgary

Since that time, seven more local Vibrant Communities initiatives have joined the original Trail Builders.[1] They are:

- Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction
- Vibrant Surrey
- Vibrant Communities St. John's
- Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council
- Vibrant Abbotsford
- Démarche des premiers quartiers (Trois-Rivières)
- Opportunities Waterloo Region

The Trail Builder initiatives began by (a) establishing a new collaborative entity in the community to stimulate and support change based on the VC principles and (b) developing a community plan including a specific poverty reduction target. Each initiative has received financial and coaching support and has participated in VC's national learning community. In combination, these measures

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[1] For the purposes of this report, all communities that are part of the Vibrant Communities experiment are referred to as Trail Builders.

were intended to strengthen a community's will and capacity to address poverty in a comprehensive and collaborative way.

Phase one of the end-of-campaign assessment has been challenging. This was not unexpected. Evaluation would have been a lot easier if the VC initiative had involved a tightly prescribed model, been based on a narrowly defined conception of poverty, and dealt with the efforts and results of a single organization. This was not the case.

Rather, participating communities were free, indeed encouraged, to take up the VC principles in whatever ways were most appropriate given local conditions and priorities. As a result, there is considerable variation in the way Trail Builders designed their goals, structures, and strategies.

Moreover, VC employed a multidimensional conception of poverty. This notion of poverty recognizes that all people require a critical mass of personal, physical, social, human, and financial assets to meet their needs. And it identifies two basic types of strategies that can contribute to asset development:

- *Programmatic interventions* that directly help people build assets in these various areas
- *Systemic interventions* that seek to alter the policies and systems that shape people's life prospects

Given this conception, a very wide range of possible poverty reduction activities are conceivable – and, in fact, Trail Builder communities have pursued many different types of strategies.

Finally, unlike more conventional poverty reduction programs, Trail Builder initiatives were not driven by a single organization but were multisectoral collaborations. Many different players contributed to the outcomes that were produced and their roles varied in nature, as did the specific contribution of the VC collaboratives themselves.

In all of these and still other respects, the nature of the Vibrant Communities experience has been complex, diverse, and dynamic in ways that add to its richness but also pose special challenges for evaluation. This report strives to put some form and dimension to the results achieved and lessons learned, without losing too much of the complex realities from which the results emerged.

The following brief tour of Vibrant Communities further illustrates the scale, dynamism, and, in some respects, "messiness" of the work.

A multisectoral partnership was a key requirement for initiating as a Trail Builder. In total, there are 2770 multisectoral partners, each of which has played a substantial role in one or another Trail Builder. The 2770 partners comprised:

- 1690 organizations from the business, government, and non-profit sectors
- 573 individuals with personal experience living in poverty
- 507 people from various sectors participating on their own behalf as individuals

These partnerships have proven to be critical ingredients of the Vibrant Communities work. Collaborative planning processes were at the core of Trail Builder efforts to develop, pursue, and periodically adjust community plans for poverty reduction.

Each Trail Builder community has a communications campaign involving some combination of the following tools: website, newsletter, reports, media coverage, and learning events. Trail Builders report high levels of engagement with community stakeholders – for example, through meetings with civil servants, business leaders, and civic clubs. The net effect of these efforts is an expanded awareness of the issue not only among the key stakeholders but in the broader public as well.

In various ways, Trail Builders fostered the innovative capacity of their communities. This included:

- Encouraging new ways of thinking about the issues in order to achieve improved outcomes
- Relationship-brokering to help move new ideas forward
- Adapting strategies that proved successful in other jurisdictions both within the VC network and beyond

Virtually all urban centres in Canada have some level of grassroots effort addressing poverty or related issues, and some communities have established more formal community-wide initiatives, often led by a large organization such as a municipality. In some cases, multiple collaborative efforts, including those of the overarching VC organization, emerged around the same time on different issues. In other cases, new collaborative initiatives were created after VC began. A VC approach in some cases has complemented these other efforts; in other cases it has introduced tension and even some level of competition, hindering the overall development of the local convening body.

Notwithstanding the relatively complicated organizational terrain shaping these initiatives, Trail Builders achieved substantial results. Identifying these results is one of the primary purposes of the report that follows. However, we preview here some of the major findings:

- A high number of individuals and households have benefited from poverty reduction efforts in the 13 Trail Builder communities. As of May 2010, 164 different initiatives have benefitted more than 170,000 households with outcomes across the different asset areas. Approximately 27,000 of these households have been part of more comprehensive initiatives – those that combine two or more supports like housing assistance and employment training. And 30,000 have experienced more substantive improvements to their life circumstance through a specific intervention. A practical – perhaps even conservative – estimate is that between 15,000 and 25,000 households have made a major transition to greater emotional, relational, and financial well being as a result of Trail Builders' efforts

- All Trail Builder communities employed a comprehensive lens when developing their poverty reduction plans. As a result of their work, communities are expanding the range of supports available, offering intensive and integrated supports to individuals through comprehensive initiatives and responding strategically to community needs by addressing gaps to complement existing services

- Trail Builders have in various ways found new mechanisms that facilitate multi-partner collaboration in delivery of programs and services. Several Trail Builder communities can now point to (a) the crucial role business plays when acting as a partner in the effort to reduce poverty and (b) the ways Trail Builder initiatives can influence the behaviour of local business. Trail Builders can also point to: (a) examples of system changes that make programs and services more flexible, responsive, and integrated and (b) greater strength and inclusivity in decision making, courtesy of improved collaboration

- While Trail Builders have focused primarily on their local communities, they have also developed linkages into poverty reduction efforts at provincial and federal levels. In total, 37 strategies have been undertaken in which local initiatives are partnering with national or regional partners to address policy issues at these levels

- Changes in public policy have contributed substantially to the overall scale of results achieved by communities. Almost all of the Trail Builder communities that have generated a large number of benefits for low-income residents have been active and successful in realizing government policy change. Approximately 38% of the total number of household assets generated are the result of policy change efforts

Key Numbers in Vibrant Communities
322,698 poverty reducing benefits to 170,903 households in Canada
164 poverty reducing initiatives completed or in progress by local Trail Builders
$19.5 million invested in local Trail Builder activity
1690 organizations partnering in Trail Builder communities
An additional 1080 individuals serving as partners including 573 people living in poverty.
35 substantive government policy changes

In addition to impacts, the evaluation examined the factors contributing to Trail Builder effectiveness. An extensive list of factors relevant to the work of Trail Builders was developed. Factors that were critical to the success of high-performing communities were teased out of the experience of local initiatives.

Factors for Success

- Vibrant Communities entity is firmly established in the community
- High degree of credibility and legitimacy
- Able to clearly articulate the purpose of their work and overall approach
- Strong convening organization
- Initiative does not have "competition" from other convening efforts in the community
- Leadership of the initiative includes all sectors
- The effort is able to attract influential members
- A high degree of resident mobilization is present in the work
- Group has high aspirations
- High use of research to inform the work

The Vibrant Communities approach manifests itself in different patterns. These patterns include the different ways policy intervention, citizen empowerment, and practical programmatic initiatives play out. In some cases the community works simultaneously across a range of issues at both a policy and program level, with the interplay between these levels achieving significant degrees of creative synergy. Each pattern reflects the different contexts in which they emerge, the characteristics of the leadership, as well as participants' expectations about the scale and pace of poverty reduction they would like to see. Out of the range of Trail Builder experience we wind up with four observable patterns:

- Transformational Change: high aspirations driven by both systems interventions and program activity
- Programmatic Push: a focus on demonstrating the value of working together on tangible programmatic projects
- Citizen Empowerment: an emphasis on grassroots concerns and citizens' voices as a clear driver in shaping the work of formal organizations
- Policy Advocacy: a focus on changing the policies and practices of larger systems or organizations

The patterns have different:

- Characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses
- Prospects for resiliency and poverty reduction outcomes
- Conditions under which they thrive or wither

Being "effective" means something a little different for each pattern. The potential for large-scale outcomes is greater with the Transformational Change approach than any other, but special conditions are required for this approach to thrive.

In the end, Vibrant Communities Trail Builders experienced a great deal of variation in the nature and scale of the outcomes they achieved. Progress is made in one area while new challenges emerge in others. Solutions that work in one situation don't apply in another. The prototyping of a VC approach in the past nine years has generated many innovative strategies for poverty reduction that in turn have benefited a high number of low-income Canadians.

What This Report Covers

The initial findings contained in this report are a first cut at answering key questions carried out using existing and readily available data. This includes statistical and illustrative information about local efforts and outcomes reported semi-annually by members of local collaborations participating in Vibrant Communities. This is augmented by more detailed cases and analysis generated throughout the initiative by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

This report investigates how these local collaborations organized and the effects of their efforts on their communities. Some elements of Vibrant Communities are not explored because existing data were not sufficient. These elements include, notably, the effects of the national supports of shared learning, funding, policy research and dialogue, and coaching.

The initial round of inquiry and analysis brought new questions to the surface, such as the need to understand the complex processes that go into initiating a VC effort locally and the different phases that communities pass through in their efforts. Other emerging questions are noted throughout this report and will be addressed in phase two of the end-of-campaign evaluation. (Additional research and analysis will be conducted between September 2010 and spring 2011, leading to a final evaluation report to be released by the Vibrant Communities sponsors in 2011.)

Specifically, this report:

- Tells the overarching VC story, including a description of the 13 Trail Builders (chapter one)
- Looks at important features of multilevel change (chapter two)
- Examines the effects of large-scale changes in terms of community will and capacity; systems and policy change; and individual and household poverty reduction benefits (chapter three)
- Explores the four main lessons about community-based poverty reduction that have emerged from the VC initiative

Summary of Conclusions: Communities have experimented with a VC approach for nine years. In this time they have demonstrated the following:	
Effects on Community Will and Capacity	A VC approach: • Supports the development of new ideas and strategic solutions for reducing poverty • Raises the profile of poverty in the local setting and contributes to a deepened appreciation of challenges and possible solutions • Engages a broad and diverse set of organizations and leaders • Attracts resources to support a more ambitious effort to reduce poverty • Can sometimes cause, or be affected by, tension or apparent duplication with other efforts
Effects on Systems and Policy Change	A VC approach: • Influences government policies related to poverty • Influences new thinking, policies, and practices in the private sector • Strengthens the links between groups in their communities, resulting in better-coordinated responses to poverty challenges • Influences information-flow and decision-making processes • Contributes to poverty reduction activity at other levels
Effects on Individual and Household Poverty Reduction Benefits	A VC approach: • Contributes to initiatives that assist many households in their journeys out of poverty • Contributes to initiatives that address more than one root cause of poverty • Positively affects the overall level of poverty in a community
Lessons About Effectiveness	• A large number of factors are relevant to successful outcomes • The progress that communities are able to make in areas of reduced poverty, systems change, and community capacity is uneven • Communities with the greatest effects share some common characteristics • The VC principles manifest in different patterns, each with different characteristics and prospects for poverty reduction outcomes

1. A Grand Experiment

Origins

The impetus behind Vibrant Communities was the recognition that efforts to reduce poverty in Canada had stalled, despite the undeniable prosperity enjoyed by so many in this country.

The poverty rate fluctuates with the state of the economy, but has not declined overall for more than 30 years

data: Statistics Canada, using after-tax low income cutoffs
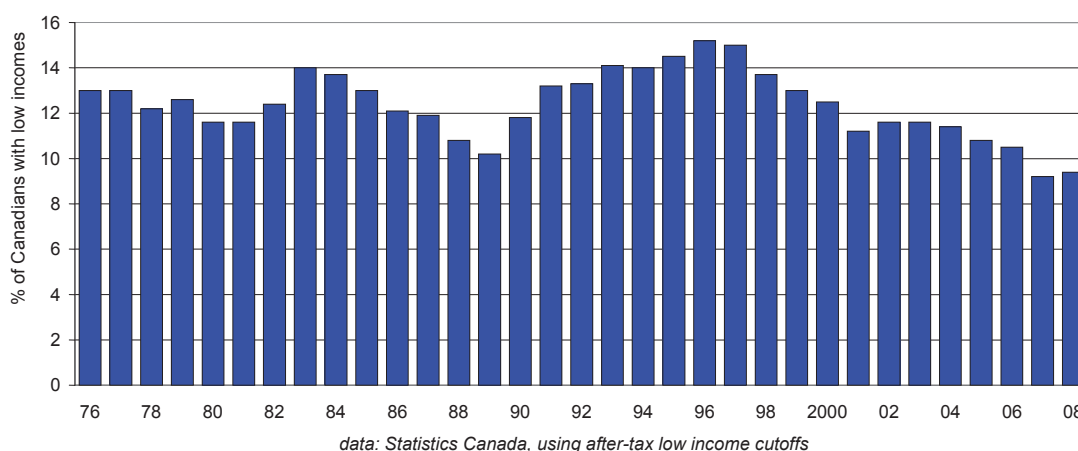
Estimates of the percentage of Canadians with low incomes go back to 1976, when the rate was 13.0%. The low-income rate rose during the recessions of the early 1980s, 1990s, and late 2000s, and fell during periods of economic recovery, with a high of 15.2% in 1996 and a low of 9.2% in 2006. But while the rate of poverty has fluctuated with the state of the economy, there has been no underlying decrease in poverty for more than 30 years.

Clearly, new ways of tackling the problem were required.

A New Direction

Vibrant Communities can be seen as part of a new wave of community work sometimes referred to as "comprehensive community initiatives." Since the 1990s, community groups in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere have been experimenting with ways to tackle the multiple and inter-related factors contributing to poverty and other complex issues.

In large measure, these initiatives were a reaction to the limitations of earlier approaches that tended to focus on individual issues in isolation from one another. While effective at directing resources to specific concerns such as health, crime, education, housing, or employment, these programs were ill suited to tackling the connections among them.

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However, as David Shipler has observed, it is precisely this web of interlocking factors that makes poverty such a difficult challenge to address:

> *Every problem magnifies the impact of the others, and all are so tightly interlocked that one reversal can produce a chain reaction with results far distant from the original causes. A rundown apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing … If problems are interlocking, then so must solutions be. A job alone is not enough. Medical insurance alone is not enough. Good housing alone is not enough. Reliable transportation, careful family budgeting, effective parenting, effective schooling are not enough when each is achieved in isolation from the rest.[2]*

The aim of comprehensive community initiatives is to engage a wide array of partners in a concerted effort to tackle the diverse factors that contribute to poverty.

The Experiment

Vibrant Communities is an experiment designed to test a specific way to address the complex realities of poverty through local level action. It was not a "model" that was replicated across the country but a set of core principles adapted to various local settings, plus a set of national supports to facilitate these efforts.

The Approach

In order to generate significant reductions in poverty, the sponsors and participating communities developed five core principles to guide their thinking and action:

- *Poverty Reduction* – a focus on reducing poverty as opposed to alleviating the hardships of living in poverty

[2] Shipler, David K. *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. New York: Knopf, 2004. p. 11.

- *Comprehensive Thinking and Action* – addressing the interrelated root causes of poverty rather than its various symptoms
- *Multisectoral Collaboration* – engaging individuals and organizations from at least four key sectors – business, government, non-profit organizations, and low-income residents – in a joint effort to counter poverty
- *Community Asset Building* – building on community strengths rather than focusing on deficits
- *Community Learning and Change* – embracing a long-term process of learning and change rather than simply undertaking a series of specific interventions

The theory of change underlying Vibrant Communities was simple: Guided by these five principles – and assisted by extra program supports provided by national sponsors – local organizations and leaders could revitalize poverty reduction efforts in their communities and generate significantly improved outcomes. In particular, they would:

- Dispel the sense that little could be done to address poverty except soften its blows
- Shift the focus from the various parts of the problem to the relationships among them
- Create the mechanisms needed for diverse partners to work together to tackle a wide range of interconnected issues
- Engage the "unusual suspects," including people in poverty (whose insights into solutions are too often overlooked) and business (which may not perceive poverty reduction as an issue for which it shares responsibility)
- Replenish the stock of ideas about what can be done to reduce poverty

This was the theory. The task of Vibrant Communities was to assess its validity by exploring three broad questions: How would diverse communities manifest these principles in practice? What kinds of outcomes could they generate over a period of several years? What kind of supports – if any – would enhance their capacity to operationalize these principles and achieve the desired reductions in poverty?

> The theory of change underlying the national supports, as well as the roles played by national sponsors and communities, evolved over time. This evolution will be described and explored in phase two of the end-of-campaign evaluation.

The Program

In order to encourage and support this experiment, national sponsors and member communities set out to create a dynamic action learning process in which Trail Builder communities would explore ways to put the puzzle pieces into action in their local settings while sharing their insights and experiences with one another through a pan-Canadian learning community. National sponsors would concurrently mine, distill, and evaluate the experiences and learnings of participating communities.

The Structure
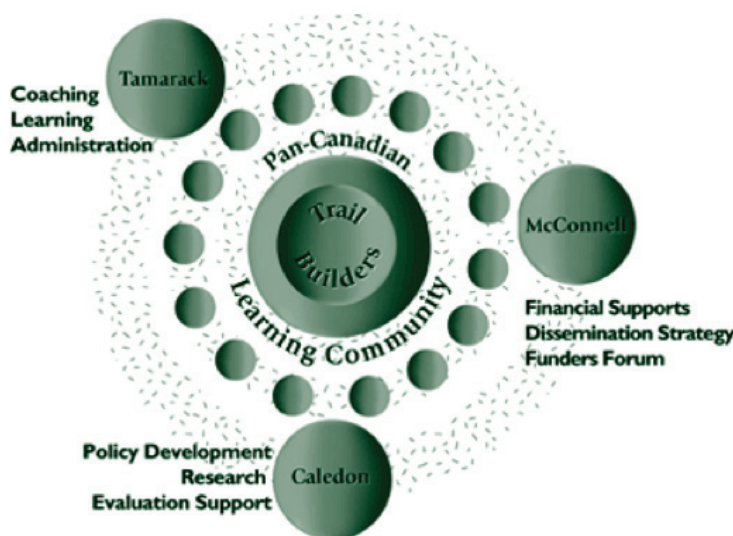
The Vibrant Communities initiative employed a simple organizational structure:

Trail Builders – a series of urban collaboratives unfolding poverty reduction initiatives in their local settings.

National Sponsors – three national sponsors providing guidance and support for the overall initiative.

Pan-Canadian Learning Community – a network through which local and national partners could learn together about the challenges and opportunities of the approach being explored, building their knowledge and know-how.

The Supports

The national sponsors provided and managed major supports for the Vibrant Communities initiative.

- Tamarack was responsible for the overall administration of the initiative, as well as for providing coaching to communities and managing the learning community. Each Trail Builder was provided with a primary coach who helped create and evolve the group's overall approach to reducing poverty and addressed other issues related to the strategy and operations of the group. The learning community comprised a wide array of resources and activities, including: an extensive website, a regular e-newsletter, monthly convener calls, tele-learning sessions with experts on various issues, communities of practice on topics of special interest to participants, aids for action designed specifically for Vibrant Communities, and occasional face-to-face gatherings

- The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation provided grants to Trail Builder communities, hosted periodic funders forums, and shaped the dissemination strategy. Financial supports were provided in the form of matching funds for four phases of local activity: exploration ($5000), planning ($20,000), action learning (up to $100,000 per year for four years), and sustainability (up to $50,000 per year for four years)

- The Caledon Institute served as the think tank behind the project. It carried out research on effective practices, documented the work of Trail Builders, and brought to the surface the policy implications of the Vibrant Communities experience. In addition, it managed the initial round of evaluation activity

Such national supports were characterized as extra and were designed to complement and leverage – rather than replace – the financial resources and technical expertise available at the local level.

In exchange for these supports, each Trail Builder community was expected to meet a set of basic requirements:

- Set a numerical poverty reduction target for its work and contribute to the national targets for households with reduced poverty and multisectoral partners

- Develop a community plan for poverty reduction reflecting a comprehensive approach

- Establish a multisectoral leadership table including participation from business, government, non-profit organizations, and low-income residents

- Design a learning plan and participate in the pan-Canadian learning community

- Secure the necessary financial and in-kind resources to support the convening, facilitation, research, and other work required to pursue a comprehensive, collaborative initiative

- Provide narrative and statistical reports on the progress of its work as described in the Vibrant Communities learning and evaluation process for Trail Builder initiatives

The Change Model and Anticipated Outcomes

The resulting model for change combined local initiatives and national supports and was expected to generate three types of outcomes:

- Increased community capacity to reduce poverty (e.g., new planning bodies, increased public awareness, enhanced collaboration)
- Strategic interventions to change the systems and policies underlying poverty (e.g., public policy, resource flows) and programmatic interventions that yielded relatively immediate and concrete benefits for poor households (e.g., programs, services)
- New and expanded benefits for households living in poverty
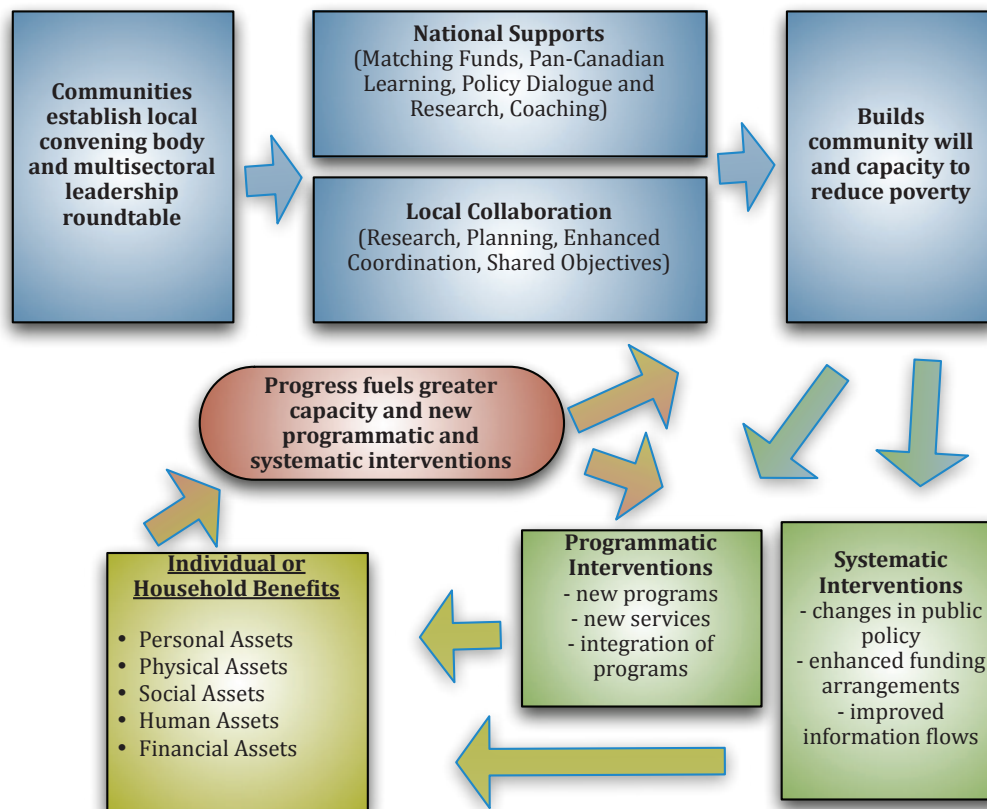
Sponsors and community members hoped that this process would be self-fuelling – that initial increases in community will and capacity would generate new interventions leading to reduced poverty, and that these early efforts would build even greater will and capacity to pursue innovative, high-impact strategies.

National Targets			
In order to establish benchmarks for success, Vibrant Communities sponsors and partners agreed that the first six Trail Builders would collectively contribute to achieving two national targets, one for poverty reduction and one for multisectoral engagement. These targets were subsequently increased as additional communities became involved and the time frame of the initiative was extended.			
Target Area	Year Target Set		
	2002*	2006	2008
Households assisted in their journeys out of poverty	5000	40,000	100,000
Partners engaged from four key sectors	400	2000	2000

*Initial targets were for three years; 2006 and 2008 targets were for the ten-year period beginning in 2002.

Shared Principles; Local Variations

The sponsors and communities participating in Vibrant Communities have always appreciated that poverty is a complex problem in which diverse factors interact with one another to shape and reshape the nature of the challenge. Given this complexity, poverty:

- Manifests itself in somewhat different ways in different local settings
- Is often understood differently by stakeholders involved with different aspects of the issue
- Tends to change in complexion over time as conditions evolve

For these reasons, communities need the flexibility to design poverty reduction plans that are tailored to local conditions, attuned to the perspectives of the partners they are seeking to engage, and responsive to changes over time. Cookie cutter solutions not only are inappropriate, but they also are not feasible.

Given this understanding, Vibrant Communities has gradually developed a broad conception of poverty and poverty reduction that helps guide the collective work while allowing each community to chart its own course. This conceptual framework draws heavily from Sustainable Livelihoods, a model used extensively in international development circles and more recently adapted for use in Canada.

Sustainable Livelihoods is an asset-based approach for thinking about poverty and poverty reduction. At its core is the understanding that all people require a critical mass of assets of various kinds in order to maximize their ability to meet their needs on a sustainable basis. Five basic types of assets are identified:

- *Personal Assets:* inner resources such as self-esteem and self-confidence
- *Physical Assets:* basic material goods and services such as food, shelter, transportation and child care
- *Social Assets:* relationships and networks
- *Human Assets:* skills, knowledge, education and health
- *Financial Assets:* income, savings, and sources of financial security, including government income security programs[3]

Sustainable Livelihoods
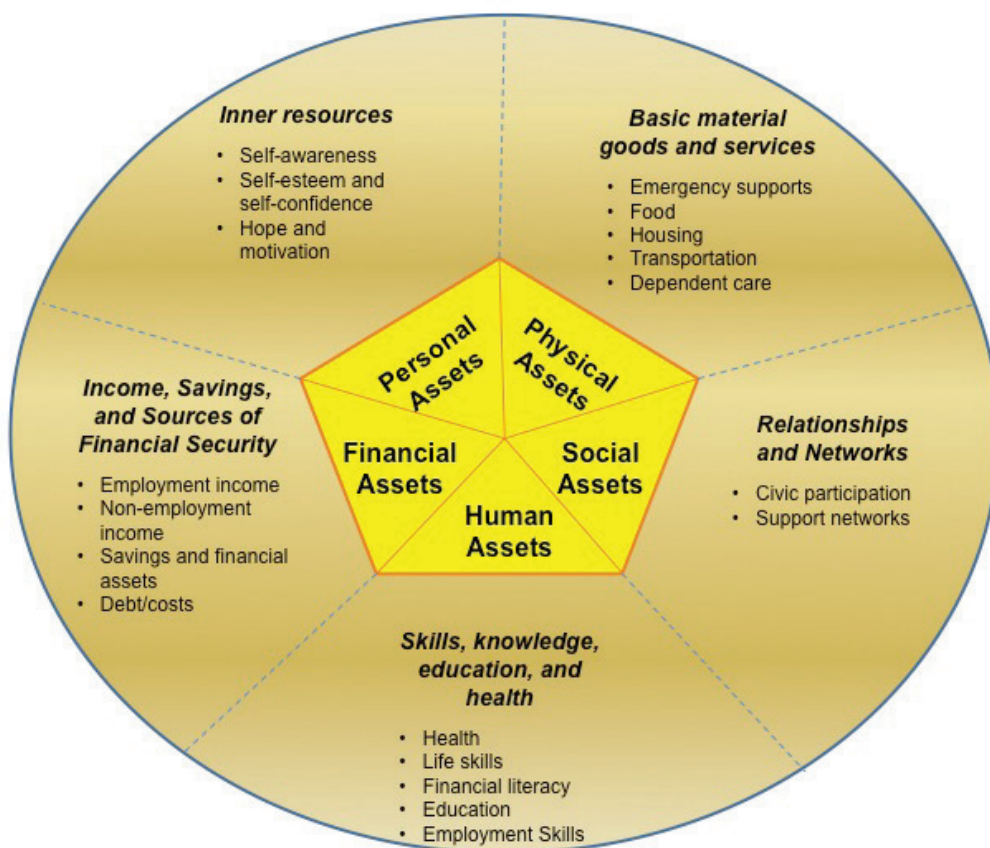
Reducing Poverty = Accumulating Assets = Building Sustainable Livelihoods

[3] For more on Sustainable Livelihoods and its early application in a Canadian context see: Murray, J. and M. Ferguson. *Women in Transition Out of Poverty*. Toronto: Canadian Women's Foundation, 2001.

In order to help individuals and households build assets in these various areas, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework identifies two key types of interventions that can be pursued:

- *Programmatic interventions* that directly assist people to build assets in various areas (e.g., life skills, child care, transportation, training, affordable housing)
- *Systemic interventions* that seek to alter the policies and systems that shape people's life prospects (e.g., welfare regulations, fragmented services, poor job markets)

Developing both types of interventions ultimately depends on action at still a third level: building the underlying capacity of communities to pursue poverty reduction. In many respects the story of Vibrant Communities is fundamentally about strengthening the will and capacity of communities to tackle poverty.

The Vibrant Communities hypothesis was that this sort of multisectoral, multifaceted, multilevel, community-driven approach would optimally address the kinds of interlocking issues described by David Shipler and thereby renew the progress of poverty reduction in C anada.

The First Group of Trail Builders

The original intent of the Vibrant Communities initiative was to provide financial and technical support to six Trail Builder communities willing to test out the Vibrant Communities principles for three years. After this initial exploration, the sponsors and community members would explore their progress and learning, and determine the case for expanding support for another group of Trail Builders. The first six communities were:

The Quality of Life CHALLENGE: Engagement, Collaboration, and Inclusion

An initiative that grew out of the sponsors' and volunteers' previous commitment with collaborative roundtables on a variety of social issues in a region with 13 urban and rural municipalities (the B.C. Capital region) and just under 500,000 residents. With a strong emphasis on inclusive leadership – particularly for people with experience living in poverty – the group focused on stimulating collaborative ventures in the areas of sustainable incomes, housing, and social networks from 2003 to 2007, and then on the larger issue of affordability from 2008 to 2010. The group's most significant initiatives to date include the Employer CHALLENGE, the creation of a Regional Housing Trust Fund, and shaping income support policies.

Caledon Stories: Initial Story – http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/555ENG.pdf;
Follow-up Story – http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/825ENG.pdf

Opportunities Niagara: Connecting the Dots, Untying the Knots

A diverse group of leaders from a variety of sectors worked across a sprawling region in southern Ontario with 600,000 residents spread out over 12 municipalities. In the midst of a continual economic transformation of the region that began with free trade in the 1980s, the group's core strategy was to complement existing efforts by "connecting the dots and untying the knots" for any group with a poverty reduction strategy in the region. Opportunities Niagara played an important role in the creation of a large affordable housing project, brokering funds for homelessness projects, an innovative transportation-employment program, early work on living wage strategy for the region, and exploration of a "smart card" to facilitate access to transit and other services. The group closed its doors in 2008 for financial reasons.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/590ENG.pdf

Vibrant Communities Saint John: Dismantling the Poverty Traps

Vibrant Communities Saint John emerged out of existing poverty reduction work by a local business network, a social planning council, the municipality, and a network of grassroots activists who had the ambitious goal of reducing the community's level of income poverty by one-half in ten years. The network's original focus on housing, early childhood development, and education to employment eventually expanded to include a focus on targeting neighbourhoods with high incidence of poverty. The group has contributed to four main streams of programmatic and policy-change activity and was instrumental in encouraging the province to create a provincial poverty reduction strategy.

Caledon Stories: Initial Story – http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/577ENG.pdf;
Follow-up Story – http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/783ENG.pdf

Le Chantier in Saint-Michel: Tackling Poverty and Social Inclusion

Vivre Saint-Michel en Santé, a community revitalization initiative in the Montreal neighbourhood of Saint-Michel, has created a new offshoot organization to work specifically on projects that will address poverty and social exclusion. Launched in March 2004, Le Chantier de revitalisation urbane et social (Le Chantier) is helping create a sense of optimism among the residents of this densely populated, culturally diverse part of Montreal. This includes coordinating the work of "partnership clubs" responsible for developing and implementing 34 projects identified by the community through extensive consultation and ongoing community meetings.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/576ENG.pdf

Vibrant Communities Edmonton: Building Family Economic Success

A diverse group of leaders and organizations launched its work in 2005 to help 1000 families – particularly working poor immigrants, lone parents, and Aboriginal people – achieve "family economic success." With an emphasis on workforce development, family economic supports, and community investment, the group has played the lead role in launching projects – including Make Tax Time Pay, financial literacy workshops, asset development programs, and the Job Bus – that have led to direct improvements in the lives of residents and influenced the policies and practices of local and provincial organizations.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/571ENG.pdf

Vibrant Communities Calgary: Awareness, Engagement, and Policy Change

An effort by non-profit and volunteer leaders – with the support of government representatives and individuals from the private sector – to reshape the systems underlying poverty in Canada's wealthiest city. This includes using traditional and social media to raise awareness of poverty and its root causes and costs among Calgary residents, as well as engaging broad local participation – including people living with low income – in discussions about issues related to poverty (e.g., low voter turnout, minimum wages, etc.). The group has been active, and influential, in shaping provincial income disability policy, a municipal reduced transit pass, and a living wage policy for the city.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/567ENG.pdf

The Second Group of Trail Builders

The efforts of the original six Trail Builders began to yield results by early 2006. They had raised the profile of poverty in their community, were developing innovative local responses, and were shaping public policies that had benefitted nearly 20,000 households. Sponsors and member communities felt the early results were sufficiently promising to expand the number of Trail Builder communities. In 2006, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation approved funding for an additional seven Trail Builders. The following seven Learning Community members became Trail Builders between 2007 and 2009.

Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction: Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child

A network of networks convened by the local Community Foundation and municipality seeking to make Hamilton "the best place to raise a child in Canada." Bringing together five networks, the high-profile roundtable promotes and supports project-based and

policy change work in areas of early childhood development and parenting, education and recreation, skills development, employment, and wealth creation at the neighbourhood, city, and even provincial level. Diversity in leadership, an emphasis on engagement and frank discussion, and an active local media – including the major newspaper – have helped make poverty a priority in the city.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/661ENG.pdf

Vibrant Surrey: Bridging Gaps, Consolidating Strengths

Operating in Canada's fastest growing and most diverse suburban communities in Canada, the predominantly non-profit leadership of Vibrant Surrey is working relentlessly to expand the local capacity and will to reduce poverty. With only one-eighth of the number of non-profit and civic organizations of neighbouring Vancouver, the group focuses on expanding public awareness of poverty, strengthening the vitality of community economic development organizations, incubating new projects, and sharing high-quality research about innovative solutions across the community.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/613ENG.pdf

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

A 15-member leadership group and more than 50-person Citizens' Voice committee working to assist 1500 households in their journey out of poverty in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador (population 180,000). Focusing both on programmatic projects that directly assist low-income households and strategies that reshape the policies and community environment that contribute to people's vulnerability, the members of VC St. John's are coordinating work in the areas of high school completion, education to employment, income support , and childcare.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/674ENG.pdf

Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council: A City Where Everyone Belongs

Sponsored by the United Way, a high-profile leadership group of two dozen members hopes to reduce poverty in this city of 633,000 people that already has a strong tradition of grassroots action, progressive public policy, and advocacy efforts. The group has identified eight broad priority areas for action over the next several years, including: asset building and wealth creation (e.g., home ownership, financial savings); access to post-secondary education; and education, recreational, and cultural opportunities for youth in low-income,

high-risk neighbourhoods. The group also has used the influence of its members – including significant persons from the private sector – to encourage broader changes to address the systems underlying poverty, including the adoption of a poverty reduction strategy by the provincial government.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/779ENG.pdf

Vibrant Abbotsford: Economic, Social, and Civic Opportunities for All

A collection of non-profit, faith based, government, and business leaders seeking to transform poverty in this urban-rural community of 130,000 in the lower mainland of British Columbia. Priorities include changing the public perception of poverty and its root causes, engaging a broader cross-section of the community in exploring solutions, changing government policies at multiple levels, and incubating innovative ways that local organizations can help vulnerable families – especially single mothers and immigrants – make their own way.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/780ENG.pdf

La Démarche: Revitalizing the "Original Neighbourhoods" of Trois-Rivières

The latest community change effort by one of Canada's most established community economic development organizations, this initiative aims to revitalize eleven historic neighborhoods in Trois-Rivières (population 141,500). A diverse citizens' committee and two neighborhood-based groups are managing a three-year plan that includes a wide range of projects designed to improve housing, employment, education, and community-owned enterprises for the neighbourhoods' 32,000 residents.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/729ENG.pdf

Opportunities Waterloo Region: Bold Solutions for Tackling Poverty

Building on the foundation established by Opportunities 2000 (1997–2000) to establish a comprehensive community initiative to reduce poverty, the diverse leadership and partners of Opportunities Waterloo Region (population 500,000) continues to develop new relationships and launch new strategies in one of Canada's industrial and high-tech regions. This includes: efforts to change public attitudes about the causes and effects of poverty; broad public engagement and education; and substantive strategies to improve employer wages, food security, recreation, and transportation.

Caledon Stories: http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/721ENG.pdf

The following chart showing Vibrant Communities Milestones provides additional background on the development of the initiative and its evolving evaluation process.

Milestones		
Vibrant Communities Canada	**Year**	**Evaluation**
CODA is a founding member of the Canadian CED Network, a group of community organizations focused on grassroots efforts to create jobs and businesses for vulnerable residents in vulnerable communities.	1995	An external evaluation of CODA suggests that organizational leadership wants to shift emphasis from jobs to poverty reduction and operating approach from programs to broader community mobilization.
CODA completes exploration of a community-wide poverty reduction campaign for Waterloo region's three cities and four rural districts.	1996	CODA wins United Nations Award for community development approach to employment development and evolution into a broader effort to reduce poverty.
CODA, in partnership with funders (including the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation) and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, launch Opportunities 2000, a four-year regional campaign to achieve the lowest level of poverty in Canada by helping 2,000 families exit poverty by the year 2000.	1997	Regional university initiates an evaluation of Opportunities 2000.
An informal "learning community" emerges with other communities that are experimenting with city-wide approaches to tackling poverty, including Waterloo, Victoria, Saskatoon, Halifax, and Toronto.	1998	The mid-term evaluation of Opportunities 2000 is poorly received by the initiative's leadership, who feel it does not capture the complexity of the work. Caledon Institute assumes leadership for evaluation.
Caledon describes Opportunities 2000 as an example of a comprehensive community initiative.	1999	Sherri Torjman writes opinion piece entitled "Are Outcomes the Best Outcome?" in an effort to reframe the challenge and progress of OP 2000.
The leadership of Opportunities 2000 decides to build on the progress of the four-year campaign and enters into a renewal year with new staff, partners, and funding.	2000	Caledon evaluation determines that Opportunities 2000 initiative fell short of its quantitative target of helping 2,000 families exit poverty by the year 2000 but has expanded the capacity for more strategic poverty reduction work in the region in the future.
Paul Born establishes the Tamarack Institute, an institute to strengthen community engagement across Canada. Caledon, the McConnell Foundation, and Tamarack agree to create a learning network of Canadian communities experimenting with comprehensive, multisectoral efforts to reduce poverty.	2001	
Founding meeting of Vibrant Communities in Guelph, Ontario, with representatives from 13 communities and national sponsors.	2002	Vibrant Communities hires Eko Nomos to provide evaluation support to Trail Builders and C.A.C. International Ltd. to evaluate the effectiveness of the entire Vibrant Communities initiative.

Milestones		
Vibrant Communities Canada	**Year**	**Evaluation**
Vibrant Communities experiments with broader learning community that includes website, tele-learning sessions, and action-research projects.	2003	Efforts to develop a standard definition of poverty, common measures and research design, and outcome database are unsuccessful due to the differences in community approaches. Decision made to allow Trail Builders to employ their own evaluation approach with minimum reporting of outcomes and learning to VC Canada. VC staff assume leadership for evaluation of Trail Builders. C.A.C. International Ltd. completes first report on the effectiveness of the Vibrant Communities Learning Community.
Communities meet in Guelph to discuss the longer-than-anticipated time required to generate outcomes.	2004	Trail Builder evaluation package adopts a "developmental evaluation" perspective, emphasizes the creation of a framework for change, and focuses on lessons learned and reporting simple statistics on "pathways" to poverty reduction. Tamarack joins McConnell Foundation applied dissemination group.
VC meeting in Guelph explores the learnings and outcomes associated with the emergence of concrete strategies.	2005	C.A.C. International prepares second interim report on the effectiveness of the Vibrant Communities Learning Community. In an effort to improve the signals from Trail Builders on demand, Trail Builders are asked to create a "learning plan." VC staff attend McConnell Foundation sponsored training in developmental evaluation with Michael Patton.
McConnell Foundation approves expanded funding for Trail Builders while HRSDC invests in expanded learning community supports. VC participants meet in Guelph and review and upgrade proposal to expand the number of Trail Builders to 13 and expand learning community to 34 cities.	2006	VC staff complete two internal reports: *The Trail Builder Experience* explores the manifestations of the VC principles by Trail Builders and *In from the Field* provides a summary and analysis of strategies and outcomes.
National staff struggle to develop and implement a compelling expansion plan, complicated by staff turnover and growing number of national, provincial and local organizations working on poverty.	2007	The learning and evaluation process for Vibrant Communities Trail Builders is upgraded to incorporate the "sustainable livelihoods" approach.
VC Steering Committee decides to end campaign in 2011 and focus on distilling and disseminating learnings for the growing number of communities and provinces working to reduce poverty.	2008	Trail Builders begin implementing and refining the upgraded learning and evaluation process.
VC network representatives meet in Calgary to explore how to develop local and regional capacity to continue their poverty reduction work after 2011.	2009	Imprint Consulting Inc. is hired to carry out phase one of a two-phase end-of-campaign evaluation. Interviews with evaluation stakeholders generate questions to guide the evaluation.
VC sponsors host a Strategic Dialogue on poverty reduction with 45 leaders from across Canada as well as VC Sponsors.	2010	VC program stakeholders participate in "sense-making." Phase one report submitted and scope of work approved for phase two.

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2. What Multilevel Change Looks Like

What do the results of the Vibrant Communities campaign look like in practice from this clearing in the forest?

This chapter takes a major step toward answering this question. It begins with case examples from three of the Trail Builder communities – Surrey, Saint John, and Hamilton – each of which demonstrates in its own way how multilevel change plays out in a real-life context.

- The case of Project Comeback in Surrey highlights the significance of this approach in the life of one individual, Ralph

- The case of resident-led neighbourhood renewal in Saint John explores the overall impact of this work on poverty reduction efforts in the city

- The case of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction explores how a well-articulated conceptual framework, focused on a high aspiration and promoted by strong multisectoral leadership, can mobilize a community-wide movement for poverty reduction

This chapter then concludes with an exploration of what these community stories tell us.

Project Comeback: An Example of a Comprehensive Project

Surrey, BC, is one of Canada's fastest growing municipalities. With a population of nearly 470,000, it is on course to overtake Vancouver as the province's largest city.

Not surprisingly, Surrey is experiencing growing pains. In particular, its social infrastructure is challenged to keep pace with issues of concern to local residents, not least the high levels of unemployment and poverty among recent immigrants, youth, women, and Aboriginals. In fact, despite a population similar to Vancouver, Surrey is estimated to have one-eighth the social services, government infrastructure, and networks.

When Vibrant Surrey's initial partners began to meet in 2003, they recognized this situation as the underlying problem to be addressed. At that time, Surrey had no social planning council or other community-based structure bringing partners together to tackle complex problems. Moreover, prevailing funding conditions tended to heighten competition among many of the organizations that might participate in collaborative efforts. Needed was a mechanism specifically designed to hear what Surrey residents were saying, clarify how issues of concern could be addressed, and broker the start-up of such projects.

Although it took time to engage partners, research the state of poverty in Surrey, and develop a common vision, Vibrant Surrey soon took on the role of "solutions incubator." Project Comeback was the first project it helped to launch. Today, five years on, this project is highly successful, helping homeless day labourers to secure stable housing and employment.

In 2004, a presenter at a Surrey Homelessness and Housing Task Force event indicated that he was both working as a day labourer and homeless. The idea that individuals could have a job but not be able to afford a roof over their heads sparked much conversation. Susan Keeping, Executive Director of the Newton Advocacy Group Society (NAGS), brought the issue to the Vibrant Surrey roundtable to which she belonged. She believed the Vibrant Communities model could help address the tangle of employment, housing, and other hurdles confronting homeless day labourers. The roundtable agreed and encouraged member organizations to consider the roles they could play in tackling these challenges.

In due course, a working group was formed that included the participation of many Vibrant Surrey partners. With input from NAGS, the outline of a program gradually took shape.

Planning, however, quickly turned to action when the Coordinator of the Housing and Homelessness Task Force invited two businesspeople to join the group. They were owners of construction firms who were unhappy with the $16 per hour they were paying day labourer companies for workers – $8 for the worker and $8 for the day labourer service. One of the companies offered to provide funds to the group to cover the costs of recruiting and supporting homeless day labourers interested in working for his firm.

Following a trial-and-error process, procedures, relationships, and supports were established to help homeless day labourers overcome the obstacles to finding stable housing and securing long-term, good paying jobs.

Ralph (not his real name) is but one of the approximately 900 individuals assisted through Project Comeback since its inception.[4] He had been homeless for approximately two and a half months when he heard about Project Comeback. Prior to this, he had been employed full time for three years with the same company. He lived independently in market housing until 40% of his wages were garnisheed for non-payment of child maintenance. The courts did not recognize the arrangement he had made with his ex-partner to make monthly payments. As a result, Ralph was unable to pay his rent and lost his housing. He attempted to continue working while living on the street.

However, it was difficult to get to work "when there was no alarm clock in the tree."

Ralph eventually lost his job because he missed too many days of work. He found himself not just homeless but also unemployed. He learned about community resources, found places to eat, sleep, and shower, and heard about Project Comeback through the Gateway Shelter, where he had been staying.

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[4] The story of Ralph was documented as part of success stories developed by the Newton Advocacy Group Society. Newton Advocacy Group Society. (nd.) "Success Stories." http://www.newtonadvocacygroup.ca/main/?page_id=91.

As the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework identifies, all people need a critical mass of strengths and opportunities in a number of areas. Some people are fortunate to have a relatively strong array of assets and simply need to address one or two areas in order to escape poverty. Others, like Ralph, have to build up assets in many different areas to improve their circumstances.

Participants in Project Comeback are offered a comprehensive suite of supports, including counselling, assistance with life and work skills, and help finding full-time employment in order to create a stable living situation. A resource room is provided for all present and past participants to conduct their job search and receive services. Participants are able to receive a wide range of training workshops, including life skills, basic computer skills, and classic employment skills such as first aid and WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System). Food is provided to participants while they take part in the life-skills program, and a job developer is available to help them identify suitable employment opportunities.

Ralph secured employment within ten days of joining Project Comeback. He moved into shared market housing a month later and then started working on long-term goals. The trust his employer placed in him almost immediately by giving him keys for the business and having him work independently has contributed greatly to his self-esteem.

Ralph continues to attend workshops and stays connected with Project Comeback, setting goals and transitioning back into independent housing. Through all of this, Ralph has maintained the connection with his daughter, visiting her whenever possible.

Says Ralph:

> I became homeless because I gave up on myself. Project Comeback helped me to get back on my feet. It gave me new hope and new life. I was given choices and a feeling of being respected rather than judged. The team helped me get my dental work done, obtain employment, provided me with bus tickets and food. They also helped me find a place to live and furnished it. The life skills workshops are helping me learn how to deal with aggression and abuse from life and in the workplace.

The program continues to be well utilized. On an average month, 200 visits are made to the program by participants looking to receive support and services. Approximately 70% of participants have found stable employment. The project continues to inspire people who have been chronically unemployed and cyclically homeless to find and maintain employment as well as increase their quality of life.

The work of Vibrant Surrey in Project Comeback is a focused intervention using a comprehensive approach to help people develop and maintain the strengths and opportunities they need across multiple levels of concern: personal, physical, social, human, financial.

Saint John: Neighbourhood Revitalization

Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) was founded in 2004 with a mandate to weave together the numerous community and government efforts in its area aimed at poverty reduction and community revitalization.

In addition to government and non-profit organizations, businesspeople were already playing an active role in poverty work through the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative. In addition, residents of some neighbourhoods had begun to organize their own efforts to address poverty-related concerns. Focus groups conducted during the planning stage revealed that any new project had to add value to the important work already under way. With this in mind, VCSJ was envisioned as a way to strengthen poverty reduction efforts by:

- Using research to deepen understanding of the issues involved
- Fostering multisectoral collaboration to develop solutions
- Building public awareness and support
- Enhancing public policies and investment
- Supporting ongoing evaluation and learning

Early in its mandate, VCSJ invested in research that led to the report "Poverty and Plenty: A Statistical Snapshot of the Quality of Life in Greater Saint John." The report highlighted several key factors that distinguish poverty in Saint John from other urban centres in Canada. It noted in particular that poverty is highly concentrated in specific neighbourhoods where the housing stock is generally old and in poor condition, access to government services is difficult, and overall economic opportunity is limited.

Neighbourhood revitalization was identified as a priority activity since it allowed VCSJ to attack the interconnected set of issues faced by lone parents (Saint John has a very high proportion of this demographic) and other low-income residents, particularly those trying to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. VCSJ set high goals, including to:

- Bring the poverty rate in line with the national average within ten years
- Assist 800 low-income households in its first three years of operation (2005– 2008)
- Engage partners from four key sectors: government, business, community organizations, and people with a lived experience of poverty

VCSJ's focus on neighbourhoods has allowed organizations to realign existing resources, reframe their services, and invest new dollars into high-need areas of Saint John. The emphasis on specific neighbourhoods makes it easier for people to understand the issues of poverty and participate in the change process. Many non-profit organizations, government departments, and local schools have internalized this focus on neighbourhood revitalization, which in turn has given them a new way to look at what they offer and new ways to direct their existing resources for greater impact.

Inherent in the focus on priority neighbourhoods is the strengthening of current assets, the people, and the space. Direct participation of neighbourhood residents with first-hand experience of poverty has:

- Put issues like energy poverty on the agenda that may not otherwise have registered

- Helped engage a growing number of residents in the life of their neighbourhoods

- Demonstrated the leadership role that low-income residents can play in revitalizing their community. For example, residents are now producing a community newspaper, *Around the Block*, and each neighbourhood has some form of resident leadership body defining priorities and plans of action

Neighbourhood work has deepened the appreciation of VCSJ partners regarding the challenges faced by residents and the often under-recognized strengths that enable them to persevere. VCSJ helps partners learn effective ways to engage and work with neighbourhood residents.

A resident from one of the priority neighbourhoods describes how she became involved with the community newspaper:

> *Along the way came this idea for a community newspaper. In six short months, with assistance from the five priority neighbourhoods and community partners the first issue was ready for delivery. I cried with pride and satisfaction for the work that was done. It was announced shortly after that there would be a job opening for coordinator for the paper. I began to call the Federal and Provincial tax departments to see what effect the income would have. Would I make enough to get off Assistance altogether? And then there was the health card issue. Could I keep my health card from Social Assistance while working? Would I dare to believe I could do a job like coordinate a community paper?*

> *I took the plunge and with the help of a friend, I did up a résumé and a cover letter. I didn't even know what a cover letter was. I wanted this job because the committee would see in me, my passion for the newspaper, that I would do a good job, and get to use my organizational skills. The thing that scared me the most was my lack of computer skills. And the rest is history. I became the proud coordinator of* Around the Block.

> *I started getting biweekly pay cheques around the end of November 2008. I was a long-time Income Assistance client, and as everyone on Social Assistance knows, you receive your cheque either in the mail or direct deposit. I chose direct deposit, so around the last banking day of every month you get a notice of direct deposit in the mail. In my drawer I keep this piece of paper telling me the amount of my last direct deposit. This one is dated February 2009 and it says amount of direct deposit is $00.00. I keep this so every time I get my pay I can see it. I now have a new savings account that I make regular deposits into. This piece of paper tells me where I was, where I am now, and just as important where I do not want to be again.*

VCSJ provides facilitation and coordination of poverty reduction efforts, and other partners – such as the City and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation – provide support. For example, the City of Saint John has committed $150,000 annually toward grassroots neighbourhood revitalization. CMHC has supported neighbourhood planning efforts and, in conjunction with the province, the development of new affordable housing. Such efforts show a commitment not only to priority neighbourhoods but also to actions initiated by residents.

Public Health and the Community Health Centre are investigating how to establish neighbourhood-based programs and teams. Not only are they providing clinical services in priority neighbourhoods, but they are also promoting concepts of wellness that encourage other government and non-government departments to co-locate in those neighbourhoods.

The Department of Social Development has approached the process to revitalize Crescent Valley, the largest social housing project in New Brunswick, through an extensive consultation process with neighbourhood residents and potential partners.

What is perhaps most significant is that the language and the methods have moved beyond VCSJ staff and immediate partners. Priority neighborhoods have gained such momentum and support that others are picking up the idea without direct VCSJ involvement.

New Brunswick has recently made several poverty-related public policy changes. Health-care benefits are now available for up to three years for clients who are leaving social assistance for a job; the punitive "economic unit" policy has been removed; support has been increased for income assistance recipients transitioning into a job; and minimum wages are to increase incrementally over the next year. These changes have benefitted just under 10,000 residents of New Brunswick. There is a strong link between these policy changes and resident engagement in Saint John's priority neighbourhoods. The issues and concerns of residents have fed into the policy process, and their expanded networks have helped them to influence these system changes.

The case of Saint John is an example of a community-wide initiative that links previously ignored high-poverty neighbourhoods to the wider community through resident-led development. This has prompted the "system" to re-orient program supports, coordinate efforts more effectively, and initiate desirable policy changes.

Hamilton: High Aspirations and Large-scale Mobilization

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR) was formed in 2005. Co-convened by the City of Hamilton and the Hamilton Community Foundation, it continues to build on earlier efforts to tackle challenges to Hamilton's economic and social well-being. The HRPR has taken the view that poverty has interrelated root causes, including insufficient income, employment, food security, affordable housing, accessible transportation, social inclusion, and safe neighbourhoods. HRPR adherents believe that, at the core, their efforts to work across sectors and put a strategic focus on poverty are the key ingredients for achieving substantial and durable poverty reduction in Hamilton.

HRPR itself operates at a macro, or community, level, articulating its shared poverty reduction aspirations across all sectors and influencing necessary policy and systems-level changes. HRPR's goal is to make Hamilton "the best place to raise a child." Hamilton's aspirations are driven by an influential leadership group that includes local businessman Mark Chamberlain, a champion of the work. Mark was able to speak pragmatically to members of the business community about the roundtable and secure their interest and commitment.

The decision to focus on children and youth creates opportunities to expand the work into areas beyond that population, rippling outward to positively affect families, neighbourhoods, the larger community, and future policy development. HRPR's strategy centres on five "critical points of investment":

1. Quality early learning and childcare
2. Skills through education, activity, and recreation
3. Targeted skills development
4. Employment
5. Asset building and wealth creation

The critical points of investment put in place the supports that different individuals may require at key stages of their development. In each area, the roundtable is working with a community-based collaborative table – in several cases joining with tables already at work – to further define service gaps and develop plans to address the underlying problems.

The roundtable is connected to more than 700 organizations, businesses, and government services across the community. It has identified shared outcomes that will have an impact on the lives of children and youth living in poverty in Hamilton. It is creating safe spaces for frank discussion and working with the community to create shared goals and solutions. In addition, the roundtable identifies barriers to progress and calls in the organizations and sectors most suited to removing them. Its task includes leveraging resources, attracting investment, and encouraging the alignment of resources to support change. HRPR ensures that learning is shared broadly with the community.

A high-aspiration, community-wide agenda has thus emerged in Hamilton, one that involves a large number of players. This has led to numerous programmatic projects and policy change interventions, including:

- New services established in low-income neighbourhoods, including a health centre in the Keith neighbourhood and an early learning and parenting centre in the Beasley neighbourhood

- Large-scale investments in poverty reduction, including the $5.9 million annual commitment to poverty reduction efforts by the Hamilton Community Foundation, United Way of Burlington and Greater Hamilton, and the City of Hamilton

- Successful policy change efforts, such as ending the municipal portion of the claw back of the National Child Benefit for families on social assistance, creating an affordable transit pass for low-income working people, and adopting a low-income tenant tax rebate program

The work that is unfolding in Hamilton reflects a striking increase in energy and heightened focus on pursuing dramatic – not incremental – gains. This has fostered a community-wide movement to reduce poverty, supported by engaged leadership from all sectors. With mutually reinforcing program and policy improvements, the overall system is shifting toward a tipping point.

What Do These Stories Tell Us?

Each of the Trail Builder communities has its distinctive story. The above three community efforts, however, are particularly good illustrations of the key qualities of the Vibrant Communities approach. Three broad themes stand out, themes that will be discussed in more detail later in this report.

1. Poverty Takes Many Forms

Poverty manifests itself in many different forms; to be effective, poverty reduction strategies must be customized to address diverse personal and community realities.

As suggested in the Project Comeback and Saint John stories, individuals experience poverty in different ways. Some people experience poverty as a tangle of many factors and others as a single opportunity waiting to happen, such as a job opening that matches their talents and aspirations.

Moreover, the specific nature of the poverty challenges that people face varies considerably. From the teen mother diverted from completing high school to the older worker who can't find a place in the new economy to the recent immigrant whose foreign credentials are not recognized in Canada – each situation involves a significantly different set of obstacles and opportunities to be addressed.

Similarly, every community has its own poverty profile, both in terms of the predominant demographic groups experiencing poverty and in terms of the physical, economic, social, cultural, and political features that define the local context. Again, local realities determine the specific issues to

be tackled, whether they be concerns of high-poverty neighbourhoods or of groups such as youth, women, aboriginal people, immigrants, or persons with disabilities.

Local realities also determine the types of responses that can be pursued effectively. Some communities, for instance, have a well-developed infrastructure for addressing social issues, a strong culture of collaboration, and a policy environment that tends to support progressive action. Other communities, meanwhile, need to build and nurture such conditions.

Finally, whatever the existing conditions, local leaders may simply have different perspectives and priorities about how poverty should be addressed. The instinct of leaders in some communities may be to focus on programmatic strategies that address the tangible needs of specific people, while in others it may be to tackle the underlying, systemic issues that contribute to poverty.

2. Poverty Reduction Requires a New Kind of Local Infrastructure

Notwithstanding these many differences, Trail Builders share a common approach to addressing poverty: the five key principles discussed earlier and the development of a new local infrastructure that is needed to give them life.

At the core of these initiatives is the creation of a new collaborative entity that empowers local people to work together in new ways to tackle the multiple and interdependent issues that contribute to poverty. This new entity differs from a traditional organization with a service or project orientation. As suggested by all three examples, it has a meta-level quality that involves the creation of an organization of organizations or a network of networks. This new entity addresses poverty not only by tackling the immediate challenges it poses, but also by attending to a second level of concern: how to improve the ways local partners interact to address the factors that contribute to poverty.

Significantly, this new mechanism brings people with practical experience of poverty into a relationship with various players who have influence over those issues. It creates a space in the community where all stakeholders can consider the many forces at play and how they relate to one another.

When pursued successfully, this process results in a heightened level of community will and capacity, leading to improved coordination, analysis, awareness, and, ultimately, action.

3. Poverty Reduction Is Most Effective When Operating at Multiple Dimensions and Levels of Action

As these examples suggest, effective strategies work simultaneously across multiple dimensions (e.g., housing, training, and employment) and levels of action (e.g., individual, family, neighbourhood, local organizations, and various levels of government). For people such as Ralph who are facing a series of interrelated challenges, multifaceted strategies are needed. Having access to opportunities and supports that generate a critical mass of assets in diverse aspects of our lives (personal, physical, social, human, and financial) is the most reliable way to prevent and reduce poverty.

While the initiatives in Surrey, Saint John, and Hamilton give life to this idea in different forms, all use their enhanced capacity for collaboration to weave the community's resources together in new and more effective ways:

- Partners share their knowledge and insights to design innovative strategies
- Programs and services are reworked to better meet the needs of the people they are intended to serve
- Gaps in the system are identified and filled
- Coordination is improved so various efforts build on and reinforce one another
- Policies are formulated to ensure long-term and large-scale progress in reducing poverty

Given the diversity of circumstances prevailing in communities and the inherent challenges of this work, such multifaceted efforts have played out to different degrees and with different levels of success among the various Trail Builders. Some communities emphasized certain aspects of this broad agenda more than others, and some were more effective at linking all the pieces. However, as will be discussed, all communities pursued some combination of community capacity building and systemic and programmatic interventions to breathe new life into local poverty reduction efforts.

The following chapter reviews the three different levels of change – community will and capacity, systems and policy change, and individual and household benefit – and provides an analysis of how a VC approach affects each.

3. Change and Consequences

Large-scale change is complex. Successes and challenges take many forms and are never guaranteed. Outcomes are the result of patterns of interactions between multiple inputs and different contexts. The process is emergent and the results are often unpredictable.

This chapter reveals patterns that are consistently, but not perfectly, demonstrated across the communities experimenting with the Vibrant Communities themes. These patterns play out more strongly or more rapidly in some communities, less so in others. They suggest the kinds of change possible as the result of taking a VC approach.[5]

In particular, this chapter examines the effects of a VC approach on:

- Community will and capacity
- Systems and policy change
- Individual and household poverty reduction benefits

The chapter concludes with comments on what Vibrant Communities has learned about the effects of taking a VC approach.

The Effects of VC on Community Will and Capacity

The intent of a VC approach is to create mechanisms and ways of working that generate new ideas, inspire people to take action, and develop an ongoing community forum focused on poverty. Part of the effect of a Vibrant Communities approach is the stimulation of a community's desire and capacity to mount a substantive effort to reduce poverty. In the nine years that communities have experimented with VC, they have demonstrated that this approach:

- Supports the development of new ideas and strategic solutions for reducing poverty
- Raises the profile of poverty in the local setting and contributes to a deepened appreciation of challenges and possible solutions
- Engages a broad and diverse set of organizations and leaders
- Attracts resources to support a more ambitious effort to reduce poverty
- Sometimes causes, or is affected by, tension or apparent duplication with other efforts

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[5] When this report refers to 'a VC approach' it indicates the general principles outlined on pages 12-13 adapted appropriately to suit the local circumstances of specific Trail Builders.

A VC approach supports the development of new ideas and strategic solutions for reducing poverty

By its very design, the VC experiment has stimulated new responses to reducing poverty. Overall, Trail Builder communities have a high number of projects, some completed and others in progress or in development. In many cases these program or policy innovations have emerged from the efforts of Trail Builders and their local partners. In other cases they are local adaptations of promising ideas that have developed elsewhere.

55 completed	109 in progress	59 in development

Examples of the kinds of innovative projects that emerged from local convening work are the employer practice and living wage work in BC's Capital Region and Niagara's Job Bus. In the former case, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE used social marketing to encourage employers to adopt progressive human resource practices. It then acknowledged the contributions of employers who increased wages and benefits or made improvements to other human resource policies, and shared their stories in the local media. In the latter case, Opportunities Niagara brought together prospective workers, employment support agencies, and employers to meet the need for inter-municipal transportation. Shaping local work with some broad principles and ways of working and then seeing what emerges is a core feature of VC.

Efforts in Saint John and Calgary are examples of how the local convening process introduces new ways of thinking about an issue, leading to broader local results.

Saint John's neighbourhood lens refocused the efforts and strategic direction of multiple organizations and institutions across the city.

Similarly, the City of Calgary's discount bus pass had broad-reaching outcomes. The availability of the pass not only reduced costs for low-income Calgarians, it also enabled increased civic participation, strengthened social ties, improved access to health and education supports, and helped more than 6000 people to secure new or improved employment.

In some cases, two or more Trail Builders drew on one another's work to develop new strategies. For example, Edmonton's Make Tax Time Pay (MTTP) campaign expanded on Waterloo Region's effort to make sure that eligible senior citizens were accessing the federal Guaranteed Income Supplement. MTTP raised awareness about multiple benefits, subsidies, and tax credits and increased the number of eligible working families accessing supports in such areas as child and adult health, childcare, and leisure programs. Other Trail Builders are now adopting MTTP locally.

Emerging Question: What are the most promising program and policy innovations that have emerged from the Trail Builder experience?

Vibrant Communities Trail Builders have supported innovation by playing a relationship-brokering role. Opportunities Niagara helped foster a partnership between the local chapter of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and a non-profit community organization to build new units of transitional housing. CAW members provided extensive volunteer labour to the project. Their contribution helped to move an existing idea forward in a way that previously had not been possible.

Trail Builders are also searching for successful solutions from other jurisdictions. Trois-Rivières is pursuing a non-profit housing service first developed in Belgium. In this model, a non-profit organization provides property-management services to private landlords, sharing part of its fees with low-income residents in the housing units and helping them connect with existing community services. The Quebec government has expressed interest in applying this model elsewhere in the province.

A VC approach raises the profile of poverty in local settings, contributing to a deepened appreciation of the challenges and possible solutions

Each Trail Builder community has undertaken a communications campaign involving some combination of the following tools: website, newsletter, reports, media coverage, and learning events. In total, 223 poverty-related reports have been disseminated; at least 2688 stories have appeared in the media; and Trail Builders have organized 264 learning events. Trail Builders report high levels of engagement with community stakeholders, including meetings with civil servants, business leaders, and civic clubs. The net effect of these efforts is an expanded awareness of the issue among key stakeholders, as well as in the broader public.

Ultimately, changes in public awareness are difficult to measure with precision because they require complicated public opinion polling. We do, however, have some data on this issue, as well as some Trail Builder examples and observations that point to increased awareness.

- In Calgary, homelessness and poverty issues have moved from 19th on the list of key issues of interest to the public to the top five

- The B.C. Capital Region's work on social marketing targeted at employers is an example of the reach and influence of awareness building on the issue of poverty. Of businesses that had seen at least one of their social marketing tools, almost half (49%) reported that doing so had contributed to their decision to make a human resources change. This suggests an improved quality of work for employees in almost 7800 businesses

- Several communities have seen local media take on the mantle of raising awareness about the issue of poverty. In October 2005, the *Hamilton Spectator,* the community's leading newspaper, launched The Poverty Project. The paper's corporate management and editorial board made poverty a three-year focus and provided the community with a sustained effort of awareness building

- Similar newspaper profiles of poverty have occurred in Saint John and Waterloo Region. In Victoria, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE enjoyed extensive support from local news media, including the *Victoria Times-Colonist,* Shaw Cable Television, several radio stations, and a number of local news magazines

- Several observers have noted a current surge in interest and awareness in poverty reduction generally. The provincial poverty reduction strategies and the increased presence of the issue in policy circles illustrate this to some degree. The extent to which Vibrant Communities has helped bring about this change is impossible to determine with precision. However, it appears that Trail Builder efforts are contributing to this larger development

A VC approach engages a broad and diverse set of organizations and leaders

Partners are local stakeholders who play substantial roles in the conduct of Trail Builder initiatives. They come from the four key sectors of government, low-income residents, business, and non-profits, and support the work through a variety of roles. These include: serving on the initiative's governing body; providing funding or in-kind support; participating in a working group guiding a particular facet of the initiative's effort (e.g., evaluation, communications, research); implementing a specific poverty reduction strategy; and undertaking other activities of comparable scope and significance.

In total there are 1690 partner organizations from business, government departments, and non-profits involved at this substantive level. In addition there are 1080 individuals who have a direct experience of living in poverty or are from one of the sectors but are participating on their own behalf.

Organizational Partners	559 Businesses	411 Government Departments	720 Non-Profit Organizations

Individual Partners	573 Voices of Experience	507 Other Individuals

Putting a multisectoral leadership body in place and undertaking a collaborative planning process to create broadly shared community plans for poverty reduction was a key requirement for initiating as a Trail Builder. That said, there is a strong validation in Trail Builder communities of how vital partnerships and collaboration are to this way of working. A complete collaboration involves commitment of resources from participating organizations, a willingness to think and act differently, and the creation of a space where partners can work substantively on sensitive and conflicted issues.

Emerging Question: To what extent does a Vibrant Communities approach build the base for effective relationships, and to what degree does this translate into deeper levels of social capital?

For example, in the Montreal neighbourhood of Saint-Michel, the local Trail Builder, Vivre Saint-Michel en Santé, has reached out to a business sector that previously was not actively engaged in neighbourhood renewal efforts and has broadened its contacts among City officials. The result? Inclusion of neighbourhood representatives along with business representatives and the City of Montreal in planning a major new development to be located in Saint-Michel. Discussion of ways to ensure that neighbourhood residents secure employment opportunities in this shopping mall is part of the planning of the new facility.

Trail Builder communities are at varying stages of development in terms of moving toward this level of collaboration.

Working collaboratively on a large scale requires significant effort, and there are costs to bear in the commitment of time and energy required. Trail Builder communities consistently identify that the effort has been worth it.

Comprehensive multisectoral approaches for local poverty reduction efforts are becoming more widely adopted. New Brunswick is supporting the development of multisectoral tables in communities throughout the province as a key element of the provincial poverty reduction strategy. When Opportunities Niagara formally closed its operation, new efforts to foster multisectoral collaboration for poverty reduction soon emerged.

AVC approach attracts resources to support a more ambitious effort to reduce poverty

Trail Builder communities were supported annually with financial resources from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. Every dollar of this core investment has generated an additional $2.50 for the local convening work.

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation provided $5.6 million in seed money to initiate the work of the local convening bodies.

Communities raised an additional $14 million to support the work of the local convening bodies.

Several funders invested $4.5 million to enable the national supports including policy research, coaching, and the learning community.

The local convening work was catalytic toward generating increased community investment toward poverty reduction. The full extent of this is not yet known (to be explored in phase two of the evaluation) but in some communities, the increase was substantial.

Trail Builders have reported increased funding for poverty reduction projects in their communities.

In cases like the Quality of Life CHALLENGE, this has meant developing a diverse funding base involving 20 different funders over an eight-year period. These funders have included federal, provincial, and municipal governments; two credit unions; the United Way; private foundations; businesses; and individuals.

Similarly, Saint-Michel received funding support from 18 different sources, including from government, community, and business.

Some Trail Builders have secured support from municipal governments, as was the case in Edmonton, Trois-Rivières, Saint John, Hamilton, and Calgary, while in New Brunswick and Ontario the provincial government has invested directly in local Vibrant Communities initiatives.

Some Trail Builders are experiencing substantial positive shifts in the overall community investment in poverty reduction. Shifts in the three communities used as this report's illustrative cases include:

- Multiple supports collaborating to launch and then sustain Project Comeback (Surrey)
- Resources concentrated on priority neighbourhoods (Saint John)
- A community-wide investment in poverty reduction of $27 million in 2009 (Hamilton)

In the B.C Capital Region, the Quality of life CHALLENGE and local partners made significant contributions to the effort to establish a regional housing trust fund. Since 2005, 9 of 13 local governments have contributed almost $1,400,000, funds that were leveraged to raise substantial additional investment from other sources.

Trail Builders with stronger networks and influential leadership have an easier time attracting funds – for example when:

- The provincial government is directly engaged
- One of the organizations involved in directly convening the local effort is a funder, such as the City of Edmonton's involvement with Vibrant Communities Edmonton

At the same time, it can be difficult to generate financial support for a local VC effort. Communities without a corporate base have a difficult time getting large-scale business support, communities with similar initiatives can experience competition for funds, and some funders are reluctant to invest unless the local convening group can articulate compelling outcomes.

> *Emerging Question:* Have funders moved their thinking and practices to better support this kind of approach in the long term?

The funding situation can also be precarious. Most funders prefer to support projects and programs with tangible, near-term results rather than the less concrete underlying work of convening and facilitation that is critical to a VC approach. Communities such as Victoria and Niagara have encountered this challenge.

The Quality of Life CHALLENGE developed an objective to foster a long-term "culture shift" towards poverty reduction. While this remained a core part of their efforts, they found they had to introduce more concrete projects and programs to find ways to meet funders' interests.

In Niagara, some non-VC organizations felt Opportunities Niagara was in competition with them in raising funds for projects. This caused relations to be strained between Opportunities Niagara and some of the non-profit organizations it wished to engage as partners in its poverty reduction efforts.

The long-term sustainability of a VC approach to poverty reduction depends on increased local capacity. Ultimately, sustainability is more about the principles involved in this way of working than it is about the specific organizational structures created by the local Trail Builder. The legacy of Vibrant Communities is the degree to which a community adopts the underlying principles as a way of working. It is less critical that the specific organizational structures needed to launch VC remain.

A VC approach sometimes causes or is affected by tension or apparent duplication with other efforts

Every community has some level of grassroots effort in addressing poverty and other social issues, and some communities have established more formal community-wide poverty reduction initiatives, often led by a large organization such as a municipality. Where such efforts already existed or where they subsequently emerged, both complementarities and competitive tensions were found with Vibrant Communities processes.

Competition can hinder the overall development of the local convening body.

For example, in Calgary, the United Way's Calgary Poverty Reduction Coalition (formerly the Sustained Poverty Reduction Initiative) and Vibrant Communities Calgary both operate by convening poverty reduction efforts. Complementarities between these initiatives include the United Way's convening of influential champions and raising the profile of poverty among senior leaders in the community and Vibrant Communities Calgary's focus on difficult advocacy issues such as living wage. In this case the two efforts co-exist well, sometimes with mutual representation on each other's committees. However, there have also been areas where the two efforts have competed for volunteers and for public attention.

Competition is also apparent in Winnipeg – where there is a long history of community organizing and grassroots community economic development – between the Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council and poverty reduction groups advocating a stronger approach to changing public policy.

Competition doesn't necessarily originate directly from poverty reduction efforts. Energy is dissipated in Victoria as a result of the creation of several different community-wide tables on homelessness, public safety, and health. Participants of a roundtable in one community counted 17 comprehensive community change efforts of various shapes and sizes.

> *Emerging question:* Does organizing using a VC approach increase the net capacity of a community to address poverty?

The local competitive environment can influence the nature of the Trail Builder's strategy. VC Calgary's advocacy focus fills a vacuum, while VC Edmonton's strategy emphasizes programs and services, given that city's well-developed advocacy environment.

In other efforts, groups try to align many of these approaches.

In Hamilton, for example, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction effectively established a network of existing networks – including roundtables respectively on economic development, housing, and early childhood development. In some ways, its focus on five critical points of investment served to align work in these areas and thereby build synergies and momentum.

Abbotsford and Surrey are responding to a similar situation with a new approach; they are talking about a meta-table to link multiple efforts.

The Effects of VC on Systems and Policy Change

Systems are about the larger structures and patterns of our communities: the policies of our governments and institutions, how different actors relate and interact, and how we organize our material resources and other community supports. When we intervene in a system we try to change these structures and patterns, and ultimately, the larger paradigm in which we operate. In the nine years that communities have experimented with VC, it has been demonstrated that a VC approach:

- Influences government policies related to poverty
- Influences new thinking, policies, and practices in the private sector
- Strengthens the links between groups in their communities, resulting in better-coordinated responses to poverty challenges
- Influences the information flows and decision-making processes
- Contributes to poverty reduction activity beyond the local level

A VC approach influences government policies related to poverty

Policy change is a big contributor to the overall scale of poverty reduction results achieved by Trail Builders. Approximately 120,000 asset benefits (38% of the total) were the result of policy changes. The Fair Fares program has benefitted more than 10,000 Calgarians; the creation of a regional housing trust fund in the BC Capital Region has generated more than $51 million for affordable housing; and the Hamilton Roundtable, by highlighting the clawing back of post-secondary student earnings from children living in households in receipt of social assistance, has contributed to a provincial policy change in 2009. Almost all of the Trail Builder communities that have generated a high number of benefits for low-income residents have been active and successful in realizing policy-level changes.

Policy change, of course, is not the exclusive domain of Vibrant Communities. Multiple drivers and contributing factors shape and influence this process. That said, the ability of Vibrant Communities to contribute to policy change appears to be quite strong. Overall, Trail Builders have successfully contributed to at least 35 substantive policy changes, and there are 40 strategies that have helped to expand community involvement in the policy-making process. In a few of the policy change cases, policy makers were asked the extent of the Trail Builder's efforts in contributing to the change. Granted, this is a small sample, but in all of these cases it was affirmed that Vibrant Communities input was significant.

An understanding is emerging of the unique features of a Vibrant Communities approach to facilitating successful policy change.[6] The multisectoral nature of Vibrant Communities helps government move on change because proposals are already vetted from multiple interests in the community. Having influential, non-traditional partners, such as local business leadership, improves access and lifts the voice of those who are traditionally disempowered. The involvement of public servants in Vibrant Communities helps shape policy development so it aligns with relevant criteria.

A VC approach influences new thinking, policies, and practices in the private sector

The business community is not a usual suspect when it comes to efforts in poverty reduction. The experience of several Trail Builder communities demonstrates, however, how vital business is as a partner in this effort, and how Trail Builder initiatives can influence local business. While all Trail Builders have some level of business involvement, the degree of involvement is substantial in at least nine of the initiatives.

The most extensive business involvement is in Saint John, New Brunswick. For more than a decade, the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI) has been a strong force in the poverty reduction effort. BCAPI was one of the founding organizations that convened Vibrant Communities Saint John, and its approach has become a model for other communities seeking business involvement in poverty reduction. BCAPI has contributed its business experience and influence to help access resources, raise the profile of poverty, and facilitate progress on key policy files.

In the case of the Hamilton initiative, strong business involvement helped make the overall case for a poverty reduction agenda; engender private-sector participation in local poverty reduction activities; build links between the City's social development and economic development strategies; and influence provincial policy.

The BC Capital Region Trail Builder, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE, has worked extensively in promoting sustainable incomes. Its 2005 publication *HR Options for Action,* highlighted examples

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[6] Given that policy change is a complex process, it is difficult to fully validate the extent to which these have played out in the Vibrant Communities experiment. Further investigation of these ideas with policy makers could illuminate these hypotheses.

of local employers with progressive HR practices. This inspired others to make changes, including increased wages and improved benefits. Many employers became champions for better employment practices, talking to their colleagues about profit sharing, benefits, and other positive human resource practices. More than 500 employers used this guide to inform their HR decisions. As a result more than 6600 people have increased earnings, secured better workplace supports, or enhanced benefits.

Other business involvement includes declared support from the Calgary Chamber of Commerce for the proposed municipal legislation on living wage; the leadership of Niagara 21st Group (a major hotel operator in Niagara Falls) in demonstrating the potential of inter-municipal transit in Niagara Region to meet employment needs; and participation of the Surrey Chamber of Commerce and local businesses in Tomorrow's Workplace, a process of workplace development and design to promote the hiring of immigrant and marginalized workers.

A VC approach strengthens the links between groups in their communities, resulting in better-coordinated responses to poverty challenges

Finding new ways of working together in a community is a critical piece of the theory underlying the Vibrant Communities approach. To a large degree, many of the Trail Builder communities have developed specific strategies regarding system development. From the beginning, the work in Victoria has been grounded in a goal of shifting culture toward shared leadership, collaboration, and inclusion. Similarly, Waterloo includes a dimension of shifting societal attitudes in its plans. Saint-Michel's approach has been to seed a critical mass of projects to stimulate a change in mind-set of a whole neighbourhood. The work of St. John's and Saint John to mobilize neighbourhoods is in part a strategy to strengthen the degree to which low-income residents are included in addressing the issues that shape their lives.

Many communities have made clear progress. There are 20 examples of new mechanisms that facilitate multi-partner collaboration in delivery of programs and services. Examples include:

- Business, employers, and post-secondary institutions were included for the first time in asset-building efforts in Winnipeg
- Similarly, Saint John's TIES 2 Work project links government frontline workers and policy makers, a community training agency, employers, and people in poverty
- The neighbourhood revitalization occurring in Saint John, St. John's, Abbotsford, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Hamilton also links diverse partners in new ways

There are also cases in which system changes have made programs and services more flexible, responsive, and integrated:

- A new housing model being introduced in Trois-Rivières provides a variety of property-management services to landlords along with social support services to low-income tenants

- The City of Calgary began cross-promoting all low-income subsidy programs in 2009

- In Surrey, relaxing the criteria and support-threshold measures is enabling low-income participants in Project Comeback to get the supports they need

A VC approach influences information-flow and decision-making processes

The sharing of information and perspectives is another system-level change that stems from improved collaboration, a change that can lead to a more robust and inclusive decision-making process.

Calgary's effort to revise the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) policy contributed to provincial legislative change that provided significant increases to living allowance and supplementary benefits, and improved the earning potential of recipients. Part of the work to revise this policy was a deliberate effort to strengthen collaboration between non-profits and government in policy making. Non-profit participants built their understanding of the policy-making process and how to influence it while policy makers tapped the knowledge and insights of frontline community organizations in their efforts to reform AISH policy.

Some communities have been successful in increasing the participation of low-income residents in shaping the design and delivery of programs meant to assist them. This has introduced a feedback loop that informs priorities and shapes decisions about the work of poverty reduction in practical ways. The Quality of Life CHALLENGE in BC's Capital Region created several opportunities for policy makers to hear about the policy-related challenges experienced by people with disabilities. Policy makers reported that the impact on their appreciation of the issues was great. Subsequent policy changes reflected many of the concerns raised by the low-income participants involved in these sessions.

Similarly, the involvement of low-income residents in Vibrant Communities Saint John put issues on the table that might otherwise have been overlooked – most notably the issue of energy poverty. Early in VCSJ's work, a local resident described the problems she and others in her neighbourhood were facing in keeping up with heating costs, a challenge that would be exacerbated by a proposed 16% increase in utility rates. VCSJ subsequently researched the issue and prepared a comprehensive strategy to combat energy poverty.

In subsequent Public Utility Board hearings, VCSJ created an opportunity for low-income residents to present their concerns. It also proposed a series of changes to existing policies and practices. In the end, the provincial government capped the utility rate increase at 8%, half the amount requested. In addition, New Brunswick Power shifted its pricing policy away from providing discounts to high-volume energy users toward promoting energy conservation by all. It also signalled an increased sensitivity to the energy poverty issue by acknowledging that energy is an essential service – that everyone, regardless of income, has the right to be warm.

Vibrant Communities St. John's has also worked to strengthen communication between low-income residents and policy makers. It facilitated the development of the Citizens' Voice Network, a neighbourhood-based forum for low-income residents to communicate with one another and with key institutions in their community, such as government. Citizens' Voice has enabled neighbourhood leaders to hear about government projects undertaken through the provincial poverty reduction strategy, to provide input about the effectiveness of these strategies, and to suggest additional measures.

While communication with government has been important, significant efforts have also been made to improve information flow with other segments of the community, such as business. The Quality of Life CHALLENGE has sponsored what it calls Labour Market Dialogues to identify, document, and promote human resource practices that support the hiring and retention of people experiencing scheduling and transition barriers to employment.

It also developed the Employer CHALLENGE, to raise awareness about the role they can play in addressing poverty. Its *HR Options for Action* booklet identifies 100 human resource practices that can help reduce poverty.

Currently, the CHALLENGE is using an Affordability Index to help employers appreciate the wage levels that are needed for people to live above the poverty line in BC's Capital Region. Similarly, Vibrant Communities Calgary has mounted a strong living wage campaign, directed in part to local government and in part to business and non-profit organizations. Its efforts prompted the Calgary Chamber of Commerce to endorse the living wage effort.

More generally, some Trail Builders have developed mechanisms that create opportunities for community members to explore poverty-related issues, including innovative ideas that may be taken up locally. For example Opportunities Waterloo Region hosts a regular Community Conversations series addressing issues from access to recreation to living wage, and from community-government collaboration on policy change to voter awareness and turnout.

Such information sharing, whether highly focused or more general in nature, appears to be a basic building block for more coherent and integrated systems. When the flow of information across a system is weak, its elements cannot align with one another – as for example when policy makers are misaligned with the low-income residents they are intended to assist. Moreover, when the system is affected by changes that occur in the external environment, some participants may

become aware of those changes sooner or differently than others – as for example when low-income people are facing a utility rate increase. When information does not flow well, the system as a whole cannot adjust appropriately to changes.

While information flow is clearly important, enabling it is not as simple as it may seem. The individuals and organizations involved may not initially recognize their shared connection to an issue. It may therefore be necessary to heighten awareness of this interdependence. For example, many businesspeople may have a limited appreciation of how human resource practices can affect people living on low incomes.

In addition, sharing information cannot proceed efficiently or effectively in situations where distrust is high. Indeed, creating a safe environment in which people can get to know one another and build a reasonable level of mutual trust is an important – and sometimes difficult – precondition for productive information sharing. Discussions of living wage, for instance, can be hampered for such reasons.

A VC approach contributes to poverty reduction activity at other levels

Poverty reduction requires changes at multiple levels – local, provincial, and federal. While the purview of Trail Builders is primarily local, Trail Builders have developed linkages into poverty reduction efforts at provincial and federal levels. In total, 37 strategies have been undertaken in which local initiatives are partnering with national or regional partners to address policy issues at these levels.

In recent years, several provincial governments in Canada have initiated or developed poverty reduction strategies. There is a Trail Builder connection in several of these. Vibrant Communities Saint John and other partners have been advocating for a New Brunswick poverty reduction strategy under the leadership of the Premier for five years. For the past year and a half, the Province led an engagement process to develop a plan that would encompass all sectors and guide poverty reduction work in New Brunswick. The strategy that emerged from this process incorporates the Vibrant Communities model for local action plans governed by representatives from government, non-profits, businesses, and people living in poverty.

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction was extremely active in 2007 in calling for the creation of an Ontario Poverty Strategy. During the provincial election, the roundtable issued challenges to all political parties to support the adoption of a made-in-Ontario strategy that would establish an inter-ministerial secretariat for poverty reduction. The province did one better, putting a Minister in place to help create an Ontario Poverty Strategy. Hamilton participated fully, advising what a provincial poverty strategy should include. More than 200 residents gathered on a July night in 2008 to tell local MPPs about the importance of adequate income supports, opportunities for children, accessible housing, and job creation.

The Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council has played a role in shaping Manitoba's strategy. There is now a strong link in Newfoundland, where the development of a provincial poverty strategy pre-dates Vibrant Communities St. John's, between the provincial initiative and the work of the local Trail Builder.

A policy change effort in Saint John reflects a number of these dynamics. When the federal Minister of Housing visited the city to meet with community groups, he might have expected a variety of requests from the different organizations that attended the consultation. However, prior to his visit, Vibrant Communities Saint John convened meetings of local groups interested in housing and poverty so they could consider together the message they wished to convey to the minister.

The result was a single "ask" put forward on behalf of the community as a whole: that Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) dedicate one full-time employee to help the community build momentum for major new affordable housing development in Saint John.

Based on this intervention, an official was soon appointed and within months was moving the local housing agenda forward. Funds were committed for building 100 new affordable units in the next year. Similar amounts were anticipated in the years to come.

The Effects of VC on Individual and Household Poverty Reduction Benefits

Vibrant Communities is fundamentally grounded in helping people who live in poverty realize improvements to their life circumstances. Intervening at an individual level means helping someone acquire new skills, resources, and other forms of assets. When someone accumulates new assets in their life – be they tangible, such as an increase to their income, or intangible, such as improved social ties in their neighbourhood – they make progress in reducing their poverty. Often the direct beneficiary is an individual, but some assets, such as affordable housing, directly benefit an entire household. In the nine years that communities have experimented with VC, they have demonstrated that a VC approach:

- Contributes to initiatives that assist many households in their journeys out of poverty
- Contributes to initiatives that address more than one root cause of poverty
- Positively affects the overall level of poverty in a community

A VC approach contributes to projects that assist many households in their journeys out of poverty

The overarching Vibrant Communities story is compelling. The efforts of the 13 Trail Builder communities have benefitted a high number of individuals and households. As of May 2010, 164 different projects have been completed or are in progress, benefitting over 170,000 households. This has resulted in a total accumulation of 322,698 assets.

Examples of how low-income residents have benefitted include:

- More than10,000 low-income Calgarians save hundreds of dollars annually courtesy of discount bus passes
- More than 2500 individuals have found jobs through various employment projects in Trois-Rivières
- 129 individuals built money management skills through financial literacy training in Edmonton
- 222 households have improved access to fresh produce by participating in community gardens in Waterloo Region
- More than 1700 residents of Hamilton have received housing assistance, including housing allowances, down payment assistance, transition to home ownership, and transition from emergency shelter to rental housing

> 322,698 benefits generated for
> 170,903 households

As discussed early in this report, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework provides a comprehensive view of the issues involved in poverty reduction. Its five asset areas – personal, physical, social, human, and financial – define broad but distinct areas of concern.

On the up side, the framework helps to simplify and make coherent a complex array of factors and their relationship to one another. It also allows diverse communities to pursue a wide range of strategies relevant to their local contexts.

On the down side, however, this also means that the nature of outcomes tracked can vary substantially: some earlier in the pathway out of poverty and others later; some very concrete and others less tangible; some enduring in impact and others potentially fleeting.

From various perspectives, certain outcomes may be seen as having more weight and significance than others.
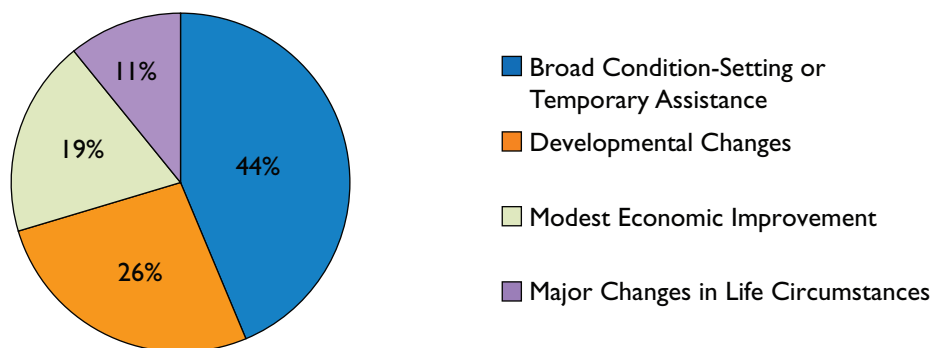
In the end, there may be no perfect way to sort the outcomes in terms of their importance. Is a change that starts a person along their journey more important or less important than one that consolidates a new level of well-being? Are the relationships that support and encourage people more or less important than improvements in their material circumstances?

Recognizing these difficult questions, we have attempted to clarify the nature of the assets generated by communities by sorting them into four categories:

- *Broad Condition-Setting or Temporary Assistance* – Enhanced civic participation, support networks, and other benefits that provide a foundation for positive changes or short-term material benefits, such as food assistance, that meet an immediate need

- *Developmental Changes* – New skills and capacities that strengthen a person's ability to meet their needs and goals, such as life skills or employment skills

- Modest Economic Improvements – Economic gains or cost savings, such as a stipend for participating in a program, home renovations that reduce energy costs, or a reduced bus fare

- *Major Changes in Life Circumstances* – Substantial improvements, such as gaining employment or accessing improved housing

The asset-building outcomes achieved by Vibrant Communities partners, based on these measures, are shown in the chart below:

Asset Building Outcomes

Legend:
- Broad Condition-Setting or Temporary Assistance — 44%
- Developmental Changes — 26%
- Modest Economic Improvement — 19%
- Major Changes in Life Circumstances — 11%

Durable change is the result of a long-term solution rather than a temporary fix. A complete and robust understanding of the durability of Vibrant Communities interventions is unclear at this time. We are somewhat limited in what we can say, for two reasons. First, Trail Builders generally have not engaged in longitudinal tracking. And second, in many cases insufficient time has passed to determine the long-term effect of specific strategies.
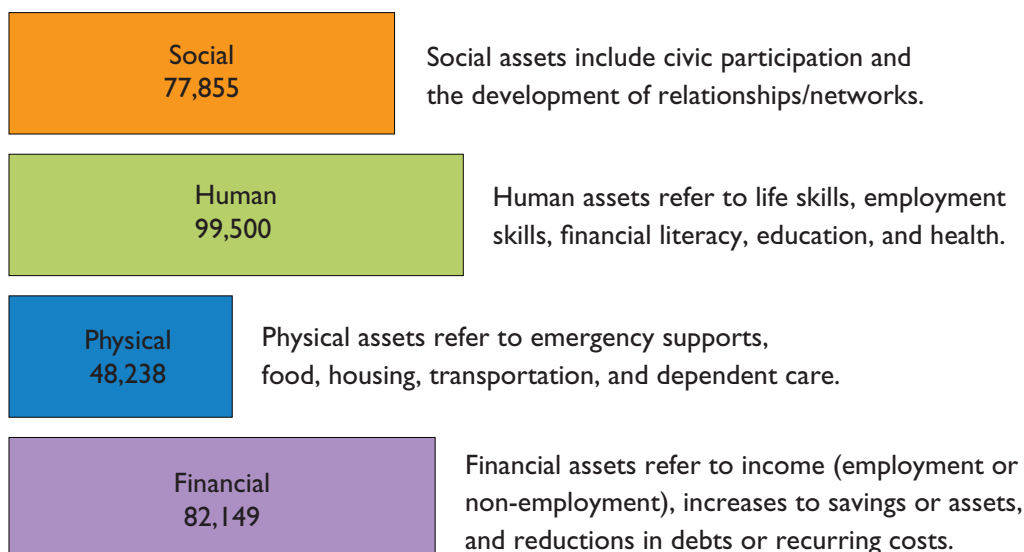
Emerging question: What additional data and analysis would give a more concrete understanding of the depth and durability of impact on households?

However, we do have some proxies suggesting that some measure of durability is being achieved – specifically that 38% of household assets generated by the VC initiative are the result of policy changes, and policy change by definition is somewhat durable. [7]

A VC approach contributes to initiatives that address more than one root cause of poverty

Comprehensiveness is a key underlying principle for Vibrant Communities. It stems from an understanding that a person's pathway out of poverty often requires multiple supports, either at once or cumulatively over time. Overall we see that almost all communities are reporting outcomes across four different asset areas: physical, social, human, and financial.[8]

Total Assets by Category

Social 77,855	Social assets include civic participation and the development of relationships/networks.
Human 99,500	Human assets refer to life skills, employment skills, financial literacy, education, and health.
Physical 48,238	Physical assets refer to emergency supports, food, housing, transportation, and dependent care.
Financial 82,149	Financial assets refer to income (employment or non-employment), increases to savings or assets, and reductions in debts or recurring costs.

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[7] Other durable changes are the creation of community-level assets such as affordable housing units or child-care spaces that are used by a number of individuals or households over time. For example, the Best Start Network in Hamilton, a partner in the Hamilton Roundtable, successfully created 1100 new child-care spaces.

[8] Personal Assets are an equally important asset category. However, they are often inextricably interwoven with other forms of asset development. For this reason, we have chosen not to present them separately in this report.

While many of the specific projects undertaken by Trail Builders generate outcomes in multiple asset areas, a smaller but significant number are comprehensive, as in the manner of Project Comeback. That is, they combine two or more distinct supports (e.g., housing, training, or employment) to help participants address the multiple challenges they face. This encompasses 17 projects serving approximately 27,987 people (approximately 10% of the initiatives undertaken and about 16% of the total number of beneficiaries).

All Trail Builder communities employed a comprehensive lens when developing their poverty reduction plans. This included both an analysis of the profile of poverty in their respective communities and the responses already in place. While all communities did substantial background research of this type, about half did more intensive research on related issues. This informed decisions about areas of focus and target populations. We can infer that these efforts support communities in filling gaps within an overall system, recognizing that some decisions are likely also the result of a need to address a specific issue and may not specifically be the result of comprehensive thinking and action.

The Trail Builder experiences give us insight into the multiple ways that comprehensiveness can play out in a community.

Work with children and youth in Hamilton illustrates an approach to comprehensiveness that involves strengthening a variety of supports available to a specific population. Low-income schoolchildren and their families in Hamilton have accessed a wide range of programs and other resources through community investments, policy changes, and grassroots initiatives. These include nutrition programs; supports for school supplies and participation in school events; improved access to recreation programs; literacy programs; youth summer employment opportunities; and parenting supports.

Surrey's Project Comeback, on the other hand, is an example of a single intervention that offers an intensive and integrated set of supports to specific individuals.

Finally, Niagara is an example of a community that was strategically comprehensive by developing a new project that addresses a gap in existing services. This Trail Builder's analysis indicated that lack of inter-municipal transportation was limiting the impact of life skills training, employment counselling, recruitment practices, and other efforts to help people meet their employment needs.

Many communities have made clear progress on working more comprehensively. What we do not yet understand is how comprehensive we need to be to fully address the devastation of poverty. No community is saying they have arrived in terms of having instituted a fully comprehensive set of strategies, and all agree that this is a direction in which the work must continue.

A VC approach can positively affect the aggregate level of poverty in a community

Richard Shillington and John Stapleton recently released "Cutting Through the Fog: Why Is It So Hard to Make Sense of Poverty Measures?"[9] They demonstrate in this paper the difficulty posed by poverty definitions and data, and the implications of how this obscures discussions and measurements of poverty. Of the multiple constructs of poverty, Vibrant Communities Trail Builders and National Partners have chosen to operate within the multi-dimensional Sustainable Livelihoods Framework.

To make any meaningful conclusions about the net effect of a VC approach on poverty in a community, we have to assume the validity of the underlying logic of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework. From an asset-development point of view, progress in moving out of poverty is highly contextual.

As Shipler says, "An exit from poverty is not like showing your passport and crossing a frontier. There is a broad strip of contested territory and comfort, and the passage is not the same distance for everyone."[10]

The ultimate test is whether people's lives are better, and only they can tell us this. We can approximate the overall effect by making some assumptions from data in Trail Builders' semi-annual reporting. Doing so, we can say that, at a minimum, 170,000 Canadians have derived some level of benefit from the efforts of VC Trail Builders. Approximately 27,000 have been part of more comprehensive projects, i.e., those who combine two or more supports such as housing assistance and employment training, and approximately 30,000 have experienced more substantive improvements to their life circumstance through a specific intervention, for example, improved housing or new or improved employment.

If we assume some overlap, and the fact that some beneficiaries of a comprehensive initiative will not make progress, we can make the more practical estimate that Trail Builder efforts have resulted in between 15,000 and 25,000 individuals and households accumulating benefits resulting in a larger transition in their well-being.

Another way of understanding the aggregate benefit is to note the high level of coverage in some Trail Builder communities, with coverage being understood as the percentage of the low-income population that has derived benefit from VC-related efforts. In Saint-Michel more than 90% of low-income residents have been touched by the Trail Builder initiative in some positive way. Other Trail Builder's also have high coverage: 75% in Hamilton, 56% in the BC Capital Region, and 55% in Saint John.

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[9] Shillington, Richard and John Stapleton. "Cutting Through the Fog: Why Is It So Hard to Make Sense of Poverty Measures?" Toronto: Metcalf Foundation, 2010.

[10] Shipler, David. *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. New York: Knopf, 2004, page 7.

What We Have Learned About the Effects of a VC Approach

Vibrant Communities is fundamentally grounded in helping people who live in poverty realize improvements to their life circumstance. Many households have been assisted in ways that address more than one root cause of poverty, and these benefits are positively affecting the overall level of poverty in communities. While the benefit to individuals and households is the bottom line in reducing poverty, getting to that bottom line requires significant contributions of communities and the larger systems in which we operate.

The Vibrant Communities approach stimulates changes in the capacity of a community to respond effectively to improving this bottom line. It does so by creating new mechanisms and ways of working in a community that generate new ideas, inspire people to take action, and develop a robust forum that focuses on poverty.

In some respects, building community capacity has been the primary intervention of Vibrant Communities. The creation of a local roundtable that encompasses the key principles and features of Vibrant Communities is meant to develop a new kind of machinery in a community. One that generates new capacity by drawing in new resources, unearthing previously untapped capacity, and leveraging existing resources in more effective ways.

Systems are about the larger structures and patterns of our communities: the policies of our governments and institutions, how different actors relate and interact, and how we organize our material resources and other community supports. When we intervene in a system, we try to change these structures and patterns, and, ultimately, the larger paradigm in which we operate. The systems-level changes encouraged by Vibrant Communities Trail Builders have enabled positive changes in government policy; influenced new thinking, policies, and practices in the private sector; and improved the overall connection, alignment, and decision-making processes of the various poverty reduction stakeholders in a community.

4. Some Lessons About Effectiveness

Trail Builders have varied in how they have applied the five key approaches to dealing with poverty: a focus on poverty reduction instead of poverty alleviation; comprehensive thinking and action; multisectoral collaboration and engagement; ongoing learning and change; and a focus on assets. In addition, each has worked from a unique community context and has organized its work in different ways.

Four Key Lessons About a VC Approach to Poverty Reduction

These various manifestations provide insight into the different factors involved in carrying out poverty reduction work and offer guidance for communities that want to pursue a comprehensive community approach. In the nine years that communities have experimented with VC, they have demonstrated:

- A large number of factors are relevant to using a VC approach
- The progress that communities are able to make in areas of reduced poverty, systems change, and community capacity is uneven
- Communities with the greatest effects share some common characteristics
- VC principles manifest in different patterns, each with different characteristics and prospects for poverty reduction outcomes

A large number of factors are relevant to using a VC approach

The VC experiment has demonstrated that several factors affect the characteristics and outcomes of poverty reduction initiatives. These factors include characteristics about the community, such as civic capacity and community awareness of poverty. They also include factors relating to the five key principles of a VC approach, such as diversity of membership, leadership style, and the way the collaboration responds to planning and emerging opportunities. A total of 35 factors have been identified.[11]

Not all of the factors are critically important all of the time, but any of them could be important in a particular community at a specific moment or in a specific aspect of its work. The key to this work is keeping a wide range of significant factors in mind, determining when and how various ones affect what can or should be done, and ultimately making them work together as much as

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[11] A complete resource on the 35 factors is currently in development and will be available from the Tamarack Institute.

possible to produce a satisfying outcome. Practically, this means the wisdom of starting where people are, recognizing the situations faced in particular aspects or moments of the work, and operating within the boundaries of the effort's context and what that offers.

Funding is an example of how a given factor may vary in its importance from one context to another.

In the case of Hamilton, core funding from the McConnell Foundation may not have been as critical given HRPR's ability to tap into substantial, already existing financial resources in the community. It is likely that once major players were intent on pursuing this work, they would have found the resources to allow them to proceed.

On the other hand, in Victoria, the CHALLENGE may actually have unfolded quite differently if it had been easier for it to secure the funds to facilitate the culture shift it was seeking. As it turned out, in order to attract funder support, it had to tie its work more closely to activities that could generate more immediate and tangible outcomes.

As for Saint John, two or three years ago it was very much in the same situation as Victoria, struggling to secure matching funds for its core operations. Funding became much less of a concern once the Province took up a serious interest in poverty reduction and agreed to provide the Trail Builder with multi-year funding. Since then it has been able to focus on trying to realize the many opportunities offered by its local and wider environment.

Any one factor may or may not be consequential in a particular community or may be consequential at one time but not another. The key, as these things play out in their different combinations in any setting, is that local leaders are able to recognize what is happening and respond appropriately.

Phase two of the end-of-campaign evaluation will examine these factors in more detail.

Examples of the 35 Factors

Factor 4: Pre-existing Social Cohesion/Capital

The characteristics and effects of poverty reduction efforts are shaped by the strengths of interrelationships among community residents and sense of belonging to a larger group in a community.

Factor 10: Shared Aspiration

The scope and pace of a group's ambition to reduce poverty will shape the characteristics and effects of a poverty reduction effort. A group that wants to significantly reduce the percentage of households with incomes under the Low Income Cut-Off rate within ten years, for example, will likely approach their work differently than one whose goal is to reduce poverty for 1000 households in three years.

Factor 15: Programmatic and Systemic Emphasis

The characteristics and effects of a poverty reduction strategy will be shaped by whether it focuses on programmatic strategies – activities that generate immediate and direct benefits for people experiencing poverty (e.g., employment program, transportation, etc.) – or systemic strategies that focus on addressing the policies, systems, etc. that make people vulnerable to poverty in the first place.

Factor 31: Sponsorship Arrangements

The characteristics and effects of a poverty reduction effort will be influenced by the fiscal, legal, and accountability arrangements made for decision making, risk, and stewardship of resources (e.g., incorporated, co-convened, etc.).

The progress that communities are able to make in areas of reduced poverty, systems change, and community capacity is stronger in some communities and less developed in others

The kinds of changes explored in this report – community will and capacity, systems and policy changes, and benefits to households – do not play out consistently in all communities at all times. We must remind ourselves of the intent of the Vibrant Communities experiment: to prototype a way of working in communities and to learn about the different ways this approach can manifest. In complex change initiatives it is difficult, if not impossible, to answer the question "What works?" Instead we need to look for "What works for whom and in what circumstances?"

Some Trail Builders have generated more benefits to people living in poverty than others. There are several relevant considerations. For example, communities initiated their efforts at different times

between 2002 and 2008; the cities involved are of different sizes; and some of the differences may be accounted for by likely variations in the tracking and reporting of outcomes from community to community. Also, some communities have experienced slower progress because of a variety of challenges, such as organizational issues like staff turnover or governance challenges in coordinating the efforts of key players.

The communities of Hamilton, Calgary, Saint John, Victoria, and Saint-Michel stand out as achieving strong effects by applying a VC approach. The point of identifying these communities is not to rank the performance of the various Trail Builders but to understand where the effects have been strongest and what this tells us about how to approach the work in the future. To make this identification, three criteria were considered:[12]

- The total number of asset benefits generated by this community

- A comparison of the total number of benefits generated relative to the total population

- The percentage of the low-income population that derived benefit from VC-related efforts

Trail Builder communities identified as having strongest effects	
Hamilton	High total number of asset benefits generated
Calgary	High number of assets generated relative to community population
Saint John	High percentage of low-income population derived benefit
Victoria	
Saint-Michel	

Communities with the greatest effects share some common characteristics

Identifying the communities that have experienced the strongest effects in using a VC approach reveals clues about the key factors that contribute to success. These factors do not guarantee success, and the absence of a factor may be entirely legitimate given that the situation of a community demands an alternative approach or diminishes the factor's relevance in some way. These factors deserve greater attention for the purposes of developing and stewarding this kind of approach in a community.

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[12] As noted on pages 51-52, some outcomes may be seen as having more significance than others. Including depth of impact in the assessment of which communities have experienced the strongest effects is desirable, however, because of the limits of available data was not included at this time.

In the high-benefit Trail Builder cases, the Vibrant Communities entities are firmly established in the community with a high degree of credibility and legitimacy. They are able to articulate the purpose of their work and their overall approach in a compelling way – often presented as a framework for change. The convening organization(s) are strong and overall the initiative does not face competition from other convening initiatives in the community. The overall leadership of the initiative includes all sectors, and the effort is able to attract influential members. A high degree of resident mobilization is present in the work.

These groups tend to have ambitious poverty reduction goals. This high aspiration orients them toward policy and systems interventions, and they tend to emphasize strategies that encourage and contribute to specific initiatives led by others rather than create and manage projects in-house.

The core team involved is effective in both pragmatic and high-level thinking and has made strong use of research to inform their work. The effort is well supported by very capable staff and volunteer contributions to the work.

The VC principles manifest in different patterns, each with different characteristics and prospects for poverty reduction outcomes

There are different paths to high levels of benefits. Calgary pursued a policy-intervention strategy. Edmonton and Niagara focused on practical programmatic projects. The neighbourhood of St. Michel in Montreal emphasized citizen empowerment.

Hamilton and Saint John, where the community is working simultaneously across a range of issues at both a policy and program level, benefit from a synergy that stems from the interplay between these levels. Program efforts help identify the policy barriers that hold back the work. The active involvement of more people in such activities generates a bigger constituency, which helps promote policy change.

There are four observable patterns in the range of Trail Builder experiences:

- Transformational Change
- Programmatic Push
- Citizen Empowerment
- Policy Focussed

Each pattern reflects the different contexts in which they emerge, the characteristics of the leadership, and participants' expectations about the scale and pace of poverty reduction they would like to see. Each pattern has different characteristics; strengths and weaknesses; prospects for resiliency and poverty reduction outcomes; and conditions under which they thrive and wither.

Being "effective" in each case means something a little different for each pattern. The people involved in VC Calgary need to be effective in policy research, building coalitions and influencing City Council. The people involved in VC Edmonton, meanwhile, need to be effective in supporting the development of enough practical projects to help 1000 families achieve family economic success within three or four years.

Based on the evidence, we can say with some confidence that the potential for large-scale outcomes is greater using the Transformational Change approach, but it also takes some pretty special conditions for this approach to thrive.

- For example, the United Way and Momentum Calgary were already working together on a transformational model when Vibrant Communities came into the picture. These two organizations seemed to have many of the ingredients in place, including having influential people on their leadership group. For a variety of reasons, however, conditions changed and the United Way and Momentum each sponsored two distinct – and sometimes overlapping – change processes, with VC Calgary filling the relatively vacant niche of advocacy with direct support from Momentum and VC Canada

- Edmonton, on the other hand, operates in a context in which advocacy activity and support is already high, including a robust social planning council. As a result it decided to focus more on a manageable goal of assisting 1000 families through practical programmatic projects

The table below outlines these different patterns, and the strengths and challenges of each.

TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE (examples: Saint John, Hamilton)		
Description: • Big aspirations for change (e.g., reduce poverty rates by half) • Influential leadership body with "unusual suspects" (e.g., business, voices of experience) • Staff playing servant leadership role: leaders are change makers, constellation or catalytic governance style • Focus on programmatic and systems change		
Enabling Conditions: Sense that community is at turning point. Trustful network of leaders deeply committed to change and willing to act	Strength: Allows for widespread participation at multiple levels. May have comparatively easy time mobilizing resources	Challenge: Can expand quickly and become overwhelming. Expectations may be difficult to manage
PROGRAMMATIC PUSH (examples: Edmonton, Niagara)		
Description: • Manageable aspiration (e.g., assist 1000 families out of poverty) • Leaders of mid-level influence, often a staff-driven process, with a governance style similar to other non-profit organizations • Focus on demonstrating value of working together on tangible programmatic projects • Engagement is project specific		
Enabling Conditions: Highly connected and talented staff team. Easy to access resources to support brokering work	Strength: Easy to mobilize people around concrete projects. Outcomes often tangible and immediate	Challenge: Scale of change likely to be modest. Can be difficult to differentiate work from other programmatic projects. May miss system-change opportunities
CITIZEN EMPOWERMENT (examples: Saint Michel, Trois-Rivières)		
Description: • Emphasis on addressing grassroots concerns (e.g. ,we need 100 units of affordable housing) • Citizens voice a clear driver in shaping the work of formal organizations • Engagement is broad and inclusive • Actions may focus on programmatic or systemic responses		
Enabling Conditions: Social capital and trust in communities. People in formal systems open to citizen engagement	Strength: Priorities and issues likely to be relevant to persons experiencing poverty	Challenge: Difficult to develop meaningful opportunities for citizen engagement. Highly relational work.
POLICY FOCUSSED (example: Calgary)		
Description: • Urge for "large-scale" change (may/may not have targets) • Engagement is "issue specific" (e.g., living wage policy) • Actions tend to focus on changing the policies and practices of larger systems or organizations		
Enabling Conditions: Pre-existing social networks that can be easily mobilized into coalitions	Strength: Potential to lead to durable improvements for large numbers of people	Challenge: Policy change is uncertain – may be difficult to make and evaluate progress. Group can be pigeonholed as "conflict oriented" and therefore sidelined

What Have We Learned About the Effectiveness of Using a VC Approach?

These patterns, common characteristics in high-benefit cases, and the larger list of factors reveal some important overarching guidance for communities considering a VC approach to poverty reduction, or to any other complex social change effort for that matter. At one level, all factors are critical and relevant. This work is as much art as science. The craftperson's skill is applying general principles to particular situations. For those who are in this work day to day, such as lead staff and volunteers, every factor needs some consideration, with some more relevant at different stages or in different contexts.

The top eight to ten factors may matter more to a leadership group in a community that is making decisions about initiating an effort using a VC approach. Questions that should be asked are: Do these factors exist? Can they be marshalled? Are we prepared to take something on in this way?

The patterns perspective aids the process of thinking about overall strategy for a community, raising the question, which pattern best aligns with our situation and our aspirations? Over time, a community may move from one pattern into another. This perspective can also inform an evolution in strategy and approach for a community. Vibrant Communities Edmonton, for instance, is seeking to shift its overall orientation from programmatic push to a bolder, more transformational one. The patterns perspective is also informative for the purposes of evaluation, research, communications, and policy making.

Emerging Question: What are the common challenges faced by Trail Builders and what are effective strategies for responding to these challenges?

Summing Up

Individuals and households are building the assets required to meet their needs on a sustainable basis. The systems that shape people's circumstances are being reworked in constructive ways. Communities are building awareness of their local poverty challenges and the capacity to address it. The high number of assets generated and low-income Canadians who have benefited are an indicator of the strengths of the community processes undertaken by Vibrant Communities Trail Builders. They are grappling with poverty in new and significant ways.

Complex issues need a different kind of traction, and a VC approach supports the development of this kind of traction. Even if you do everything right, it can be challenging to implement, and it takes time. There are clear benefits to meeting this challenge, however, communities using a VC approach are able to attract significant resources, engage a broad and diverse range of multi-sectoral leadership, raise the profile and understanding of poverty, and introduce innovative solutions. This contributes to a community's ability to influence substantive public policies related to poverty, strengthen links and coordination of responses to poverty, and shape private-sector practices.

So What?

What is the result of all this?

We are better able to assist a large number of people in their journey out of poverty, address more than one root cause of poverty, and contribute to deep and durable impacts.

Has this approach been fully effective in all communities and for all people in poverty? No. Poverty takes different shapes in different settings and for different individuals. Various communities as well as individuals are finding their different paths. In some cases, the results have been relatively powerful, and in others, less so.

In the end, such variation is not terribly surprising. Progress is made in one area while new challenges emerge in others. Solutions that work in one situation don't apply in another. The work of Vibrant Communities over the past nine years has been about prototyping: testing out certain approaches knowing that they will manifest themselves in different ways in different circumstances. This experiment is a rich source of experience for understanding how best to realize the full potential of these ideas and practices. The bottom line is that this approach changes communities, and under the right conditions the impact can be powerful.

Now What?

This paper answers a set of initial questions about the outcomes of Trail Builder efforts, and what we can conclude about the effectiveness of the Vibrant Communities approach for reducing poverty. These conclusions are based on currently available data. This does not, however, conclude the end-of-campaign evaluation. This first phase feeds into the next with an emerging set of questions and the beginnings of a research agenda. Throughout this document we have identified new questions and areas where further inquiry and analysis is warranted. In conclusion, we revisit these emerging questions here setting the table for the next phase of this evaluation.

Effects

- *Have funders moved their thinking and practices to better support this kind of approach in the long term?*

- *What are the most promising program and policy innovations that have emerged from the Trail Builder experience?*

- *What additional data and analysis would give a more concrete understanding of the depth and durability of impact on households?*

- *Does organizing using a VC approach increase the net capacity of a community to address poverty?*

Patterns of Effectiveness

- *What is involved in initiating this kind of effort locally?*

- *What are the different phases that a community goes through and are different factors for effectiveness more relevant at different times?*

- *To what extent does a Vibrant Communities approach build the base for effective relationships and to what degree does this then translate into deeper levels of social capital?*

- *What are the common challenges faced by Trail Builders and what are effective strategies for responding to these challenges?*

The National Supports

- *What are the effects and dynamics of the various learning activities? What are the overall implications of having a learning orientation to the initiative?*

- *What is the value of being linked to a national policy institute?*

- *What are the benefits of being part of a national network?*

- *What are the benefits of coaching support?*

- *What are the benefits of VC financial support?*

APPENDIX
Methods

Purpose

The purpose of the end-of-campaign evaluation is to provide a summative account of the Vibrant Communities initiative for the years 2002–2011.

The assessment in this report focuses on: understanding the local outcomes of the initiatives; lessons learned about collaborative, comprehensive approaches; the sustainability of local efforts; and how best to support this approach through funding and policy.

These questions will be explored as part of a broader exploration of the effects and learnings about place-based, comprehensive, and collaborative efforts to address poverty and complex issues with other intermediaries in the field (e.g., United Way, Canadian Community Economic Development Network). This process is described in the scope of work developed by Tamarack entitled: "Comprehensive and Collaborative Local Approaches to Poverty and Other Complex Issues: Where to From Here?"

Audiences

The primary audience of this evaluation is people and organizations in three broad clusters:

- The staff and board members of sponsoring organizations (e.g., J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Caledon Institute, and Tamarack Institute)
- The key volunteers, staff, and organizational partners in the Vibrant Communities initiative
- Funders and institutional partners that have contributed significantly to the initiative (e.g., RBC Financial Group, Maytree Foundation)

The direct stakeholders are concerned with answering the standard questions people ask at the end of a major initiative: What were the outcomes? What were the lessons learned? To what extent are these lessons "scalable" and "applicable" to other communities? Were the overall benefits of the initiative worth the overall investment?

The secondary audience for the evaluation results is composed of other people and organizations within Canada that might be usefully informed by the experience of Vibrant Communities. This includes local leaders and organizations that are curious about – or already have decided to adopt – a collaborative and comprehensive approach to reduce poverty, or other complex issues such as community safety, homelessness, health, education, and early childhood development. It is also composed of people and organizations involved in funding, providing technical assistance, evaluating, and shaping policy related to such efforts.

These stakeholders were consulted to develop the evaluation questions:

Aisling Gogan	Newfoundland Poverty Reduction Strategy
Al Hatton	United Way of Canada
Alan Broadbent	Maytree Foundation
James Hughes	Department of Social Development, New Brunswick
John Cawley	McConnell Foundation
Joshua Bates	Federation of Canadian Municipalities
Mike Toye	Canadian Community Economic Development Network
Monica Patton	Community Foundations of Canada
Paul Born	Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement
Ratna Omidvar	Maytree Foundation
Sherri Torjman	Caledon Institute of Social Policy
Tim Brodhead	J.W. McConnell Family Foundation
Tim Draimin	Social Innovation Generation

Methodology

The sponsors of Vibrant Communities have organized the initiative's end-of-campaign evaluation into two phases, with the first phase informing the questions and methodologies of the second phase.

- Phase one (December 2009 to July 2010)– identify the questions that VC stakeholders would like addressed in the evaluation, surface initial conclusions by drawing upon the large volume of data on Vibrant Communities that already exists (e.g., statistics, case studies, reports), and surface questions for phase two

- Phase two (July 2010 to Spring 2011) – deepen the understanding of phase one conclusions with additional data collection and analysis, and address new questions generated through phase one of the evaluation

This report represents the findings of the first phase of the evaluation. Vibrant Communities sponsors will release a final end-of-campaign evaluation report in 2011.

Vibrant Communities staff have described the approach used in the end-of-campaign evaluation in more detail in the document "Evaluating Vibrant Communities Initiative: Discussion Paper." This document is available upon request from Mark Cabaj, Executive Director, Vibrant Communities Canada (mark@tamarackcommunity.ca; 780-452-4562).

Evaluators

The evaluation process for phase one was facilitated by Jamie Gamble of Imprint Consulting Inc. An internal research team led by Mark Cabaj and Eric Leviten-Reid made significant contributions to the organization and analysis of data.

Evaluation Questions

Key evaluation questions for phase one and phase two of the end-of-campaign evaluation

What is the VC model?
Is VC a model? Is it replicable (or what components are replicable)? How?
Is the effort to create this complex local governance/collaboration in a community worth what you get in return?
What are the implications for other funders/governments for supporting this kind of approach?

What is the performance of the model with respect to poverty reduction?
Was the poverty reduction effect stronger in some communities?
Is it possible to articulate why?

What is the experience of applying the VC model?
What are the lessons about stimulating and supporting collaboration in communities?
What are the key lessons about engagement with government, low-income residents, and the business community?
What are the benefits of supporting a peer learning community as part of the initiative?

In December 2009 and January 2010, the evaluation facilitator contacted internal and external stakeholders to gauge their general interest in the evaluation, and the sorts of questions they would like to see answered in the end-of-campaign evaluation. External stakeholders included national organizations that work with, or have an interest in, comprehensive community approaches, and some provincial governments with poverty reduction strategies. Internal stakeholders were key representatives from Trail Builder convening organizations and the National Steering Committee with representatives from Tamarack, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Input from VC Conveners was gathered via conference call and a brief web-based survey. Telephone interviews were conducted with National Steering Committee representatives and external stakeholders.

Data Sources

The evaluation team used the following sources of data to answer the evaluation questions identified by stakeholders:

- *VC by the Numbers* provided quantitative data about cumulative outcomes reported by Vibrant Communities Trail Builders. VC by the Numbers is based on Basic Outcome Tracking reports submitted by Trail Builders on a semi-annual basis (May 1 and November 1). All poverty reduction strategies reported are those to which the local Trail Builder initiative has made a substantial contribution (e.g., initiating, organizing, facilitating, funding, administering)

- *Basic Outcome Tracking* is intended to record near-term, easy-to-track outcomes. Individual or household outcomes indicate, at a minimum, that the Trail Builder and/or its local partners confirm that a low-income individual or household has participated in a poverty reduction strategy and experienced some meaningful benefit. In many cases, Trail Builders conduct their own evaluations of specific strategies (tracking the progress of participants; conducting interviews, surveys or focus groups) to determine more precisely the results achieved

- *Caledon Institute of Social Policy stories* provided illustrative examples and analysis on various themes. Caledon stories document various models for poverty reduction that have been employed successfully by Trail Builders. Framework for Change Stories capture the experience of each Trail Builder as it evolves. Other stories focus on specific poverty reduction strategies these initiatives employ. Periodic reflection papers identify commonalities and differences from across the communities and draw out lessons about the overall approach to poverty reduction

- *Most Significant Change stories* were used to surface a deeper understanding of the nature of change. Trail Builder conveners submitted case examples of what they understood to be significant changes resulting from their work. These stories were reviewed by small groups (made up of five or six persons) as part of an evaluation workshop held with conveners, coaches, and national partners. Groups were asked to identify which stories they thought were most significant and share these with the larger group. These selections and additional observations were used to surface broader patterns about outcomes and change

- *A Survey of the Factors* that influence the characteristics and effects of Trail Builders' poverty reduction efforts was completed by coaches and Trail Builder communities. These factors were identified through review of Trail Builder reports and emerging themes in various discussions on the issue since VC started in 2002. They were organized by (a) context in which Trail Builders work, (b) the five principles of VC (e.g., poverty reduction, asset building approach, multisectoral approach, comprehensiveness, and learning and change), (c) characteristics of the core support group (e.g., skilled staff), and (d) VC supports

- *Various Trail Builder documents* were accessed to further understand specific themes and questions

- *Tamarack coaches and conveners* contributed additional perspective and analysis throughout the process

Analysis, Interpretation, Conclusions

The process of interpreting and making sense of the data involved a series of interpretation focus groups done by telephone with the National Steering Committee and the Trail Builder Conveners. For these sessions, preliminary conclusions were generated from the data and then tested for further interpretation and analysis with these internal stakeholders.

In March 2010, the evaluator and research team facilitated a workshop with Vibrant Communities Conveners, Coaches and National Partners focused on the end-of-campaign evaluation. The workshop included the review of Most Significant Change stories, conclusions about effectiveness, different patterns of how the VC principles manifest in communities, and input into a draft set of conclusions about the results of Trail Builder efforts. These conclusions and evaluation report were tested and revised in several conversations with conveners, coaches and national partners over April, May and June.

The Report

The initial findings from the final evaluation were submitted to the Vibrant Communities Steering Committee in September 2010.

Vibrant Communities (2002-2010):
Evaluation Report

September 2010

Errata

Page 38 – The second to last bullet point should read:

- The B.C. Capital Region's work on social marketing targeted at employers is an example of the reach and influence of awareness building on the issue of poverty. Of businesses that had seen at least one of their social marketing tools, almost half (49%) reported that doing so had contributed to their decision to make a human resources change. At a minimum, the initiative documented 2000 businesses that had altered human resource practices as a result of the tools it had distributed.

Page 60 – The table on this page should be formatted as below:

Trail Builder communities identified as having the strongest effects	
Hamilton Calgary Saint John Victoria Saint-Michel	High total number of asset benefits generated
	High number of assets generated relative to community population
	High percentage of low-income population derived benefit