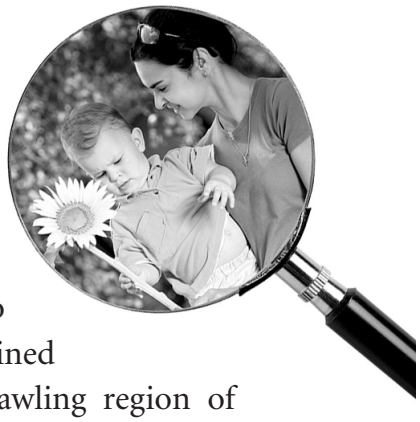
Introduction



This book explores the efforts of collaborative groups in six different Canadian cities as they work to reduce poverty. These groups are: a project that seeks to get long-term unemployed job seekers trained and transported to jobs across the sprawling region of Niagara; a coalition pressing Calgary City Council to pass (and maintain) a subsidized bus pass for people with low incomes; a grassroots network of citizens' partnership clubs in Montréal working to turn around a forgotten neighbourhood; an unusual collection of local organizations in Surrey working to get homeless day labourers back into the mainstream; a high-level roundtable of civic leaders in Hamilton mobilizing the community to make it the best place to raise a child; and a business-led group in Saint John that aims to reduce that City's poverty rate by one half.

The common thread among these groups is that they are guided, to varying degrees, by a desire to employ a comprehensive approach in their work – one that tries to tackle the interconnected cause-and-effect variables of poverty.

Support for a concentrated effort to reduce poverty has grown in recent years. The general public's interest in poverty reduction has remained consistently high over the past two decades, fuelled, perhaps, by the recognition

that economic restructuring, increasing levels of debt, and recessions have increased the number of people who are just a few paycheques from economic uncertainty. In poll after poll, Canadians have reported that they feel reducing poverty is important, that it is possible, and that they want governments – and other sectors of society – to do more to make it happen. Formal institutions, such as police services, health organizations, and teachers' associations, have joined the chorus. They understand that the effects of poverty and exclusion put an extra demand on their already stretched services and budgets. Business organizations have pointed out that poverty is a drag on productivity, while organized labour and faith-based organizations argue that poverty in a land of plenty is unethical.

More and more governments and communities are responding to the challenge. A Senate subcommittee's call for an all-encompassing federal poverty reduction strategy resurrected an earlier pan-Canadian commitment to addressing poverty, and seven out of ten provincial governments in Canada are now implementing a poverty reduction plan or strategy that stresses a comprehensive approach. Our three territorial governments are well down the path of establishing plans. There are also approximately 40 cross-sector roundtables in urban centres across the country that have created (or are creating) local comprehensive strategies or plans to reduce poverty.

At the core of most of these efforts is an explicit shift away from the piecemeal approach that focused on one dimension of poverty at a time and a movement toward a more comprehensive process that gets at the multiple factors underlying poverty. Why? Because poverty is complex.

The Complex Nature of Poverty

The case for a comprehensive approach to poverty is strong because the constellation of "cause-and-effects" underlying poverty are numerous and complex. While governments and research agencies typically define (and measure) poverty as a lack of income, it is actually a broad reality composed of a variety of interrelated problems:

> Listening to people talk about their experience of poverty, it is clear that poverty is complex and multidimensional. Poverty is more than simply a lack of income. It is the stress caused by the inability to make ends meet, social isolation, and the fatalism and lack of time that prevent political engagement. It is the associated material deprivation, poor housing and neighbourhood decline. Poverty is a product of multiple causes and can have multifarious, interconnected short- and long-term negative consequences that make life difficult to cope with. Such complexity is easily overlooked and frustrates the best intentions of policymakers who are often tempted to tackle single causes and specific outcomes. (Tomlinson and Walker, 2009: 1)

This web of interconnected cause-and-effects can create a poverty trap in which problems interlock, increasing one another's negative effects. The deeper a family's poverty, the stronger the trap and the more difficult for them to break free. David Shipler, the author of *Working Poor: Invisible in America*, illustrates this dynamic by describing the plight of a single mother holding down several low-paying jobs:

> For practically every family, then, the ingredients of poverty are part financial and part psychological, part personal and part societal, part past and part present. 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. (Shipler, 2003: 11)

The key to reducing poverty, therefore, is to unlock or disrupt these interlocking cause-and-effect relationships. This requires a comprehensive approach that is sensitive to, and eventually addresses the totality of, the interconnected problems:

> … If problems are interlocking then so too solutions must 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. (Shipler, 2003: 11)

In the face of this bewildering array of factors, eliminating poverty for even one person or family is an intimidating prospect. Reducing poverty on a larger scale is even more daunting because the manifestations of poverty vary from person to person and from place to place. (See Table 1.) The poverty of a homeless teenager escaping an abusive family in Victoria is dramatically dissimilar to that of an accomplished older immigrant holding down several low-paying jobs because his/her engineering degree is not recognized in Canada. The challenge of barely getting by with poverty-level wages in the booming oil town of Fort McMurray is

different from coping on the same amount of money in a rural community in Québec. Finally, the temporary poverty of a university student is starkly different from that of a young child in a family that has been receiving social assistance for three generations. As with all complex issues, there are no cookie-cutter solutions to poverty (Cabaj, 2004).

Table 1: The Poverty Matrix

A general framework to examine poverty statistics among the five demographic groups experiencing the highest incidence of poverty.

		Demographic Groups*				
		Work-limiting disabilities	Recent immigrants	Unattached individuals aged 45 to 59	Lone parents	Aboriginal people
Level of Poverty	At-Risk					
	Working (Waged) Poor					
	Temporarily Unemployed					
	Dependent Poor					
	Homeless					

* Peter Hicks indicates that 54% of all persistently poor families in 1997 were found in these five categories. See "Preparing for Tomorrow's Social Policy Agenda" (SRDC Working Paper Series 02-04. November 2002).

Ironically, many poverty traps exist in part because of well-meaning, albeit clumsy, efforts of governments and communities. For example, most families receiving social assistance across Canada experience the Catch-22 of typical welfare systems: They are forced to give up their financial assets before they go on social assistance and then are limited in how much they may earn once they find work if they're going to stay on assistance. Faced with the combination of low asset limits, low earning exemptions, and

low welfare rates, they are left in a perpetual state of low income, tangled up in a frayed social safety net when what they need is a trampoline. Similarly, people who are homeless may struggle to obtain all of the possible support services available to them because they lack a fixed address, have to resort to predatory loan sharks or cheque-cashing businesses because they do not have a bank account, and are forced to pay much higher-than-average costs for low-quality food thanks to the desertion of their neighbourhood by mainstream grocers (and the incursion of convenience stores that carry low-nutrition foodstuffs at higher-than-normal costs).

Poverty is perhaps the most extreme example of what policy analysts and social change advocates call "wicked issues" or "social messes": problems where the cause-and-effect relationships are really a constellation of tightly coupled problems, are unique from one case to the next, can be approached from many different angles, and are bereft of simple solutions.

Canada has made significant progress in reducing poverty over the past hundred years. Governments and local agencies have developed a vast and elaborate array of programs and services to address the factors related to poverty (e.g., affordable housing, income support, public education) for a variety of different demographic groups (e.g., seniors, unemployed) and communities (e.g., rural, urban).

While the number of Canadians who are poor has decreased, the poverty reduction needle remains stubbornly stuck. The gap between rich and poor is widening. While poverty levels tend to go up and down with the fortunes of the economy, they have not gone down appreciably for several decades. Why?

Enter Vibrant Communities Canada

Vibrant Communities Canada was founded by Paul Born, President of Tamarack – an Institute for Community Engagement, as that institute's first major initiative. It was formally launched in the spring of 2002 in partnership with the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and small leadership groups from cities across Canada. The goal of the network was simple: to experiment with a new local approach to addressing poverty that was guided by five key principles:

1. *Poverty is better addressed when reduction, not alleviation, is the goal*
2. *Poverty is more effectively addressed by multisector leadership and collaboration*, involving business, government, and non-profit leaders as well as people with firsthand experience in living with poverty
3. *Poverty reduction is more effective when comprehensively focused on the interrelated cause-and-effects of poverty* as opposed to isolated and unrelated efforts to address symptoms
4. *Poverty reduction is more effective when built on local assets* as opposed to looking for solutions from outside the community
5. *Poverty reduction efforts are more productive when they are part of an ongoing process of learning, evaluation, and change* rather than the pursuit of a silver bullet

Collaborative roundtables from 16 cities participated in the initiative's Learning Community: B.C.'s Capital Region, Surrey, Abbotsford, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon (briefly), Winnipeg, Waterloo Region, Hamilton, Niagara Region, the Saint-Michel district of Montréal, Trois-Rivières, Halifax,

Saint John, Sydney (Nova Scotia), and St. John's. With extra financial and technical support from national organizations, 13 of them (called Trail Builders) experimented with their own unique application of these principles through poverty reduction campaigns that lasted five to ten years.

The progress of Trail Builders in reducing poverty since then has been impressive (see Table 2). Thousands of organizations have developed hundreds of innovative initiatives that have helped nearly 200,000 households to move forward in their efforts to escape their poverty trap. The accumulated lessons about the challenges and opportunities of a more comprehensive, multisector local approach to poverty – an approach that was developed through a process of trial and error in local communities – are also substantial. The Vibrant Communities website contains hundreds of stories, reports, articles, tools, and teleconferences exploring a variety of topics. These range from substantive challenges (e.g., how to develop a living wage campaign) to process issues (e.g., how to work with governments to change public policy). (See <www.vibrantcommunities.ca>.)

Table 2: Vibrant Communities Collective Results (June 2011)
Individual and Household Impacts • 197,575 individuals and households have received 407,578 benefits from Vibrant Communities efforts, including increases in income, access to food and shelter, and the acquisition of skills and knowledge
Community Engagement • More than 3,000 businesses, government departments, voluntary sector organizations, voices of experience, and citizens are engaged • 3,700 media stories, reports, and learning events about poverty have been reported/taken place in 13 communities across Canada
Community Innovations • 238 poverty reducing strategies and projects have been completed or are in progress
Policy Change • 45 strategies have expanded community involvement in the policy-making process • 40 strategies have produced substantive policy changes in areas such as transportation and housing

This Study

The aim of this study is straightforward: to help readers – specifically those involved in a local poverty reduction coalition in an urban community – understand more clearly how they can reduce poverty by developing deeply integrated responses to the multiple cause-and-effects of poverty. To accomplish this goal, we are driven by a three simple questions:

- What are the different ways a local group might tackle the interrelated cause-and-effect factors underlying poverty?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches?
- What are the keys to making each approach most successful?

As you read through the stories in this book, you will see that there are many other dimensions of poverty reduction that we could explore; however, we have chosen to focus solely on the discrete challenge of how to develop what Tony Blair, former Primer Minister of Great Britain, referred to as "joined-up solutions to joined-up problems" (Oyen, 2002). This work complements an already growing volume of research on comprehensive strategies. The members of the Aspen Institute have summarized 20 years of the Institute's research on comprehensive community initiatives (Kubisch et al., 2002; 2009), and Eric Leviten-Reid has provided a broader exploration of the challenges of comprehensive strategies (Leviten-Reid, 2009).

Having followed closely the on-the-ground work of more than one dozen Trail Builder communities, we found it difficult to choose which case studies to investigate in more depth. Every local group has something to teach us about the challenges of this work. Eventually, we applied two basic criteria to help us narrow the field to the six examples in this book.

The first criterion was that a group's efforts yielded some type of measurable effects, particularly on local poverty. In the field of research, this is called "purposeful sampling." These efforts were not required to have been completely successful. As the local actors in each of these change stories will freely admit, there have been setbacks in each local change effort and few people are altogether clear on the ultimate impact of their work in reducing poverty. Yet, in each of the highlighted case studies, people have witnessed and tracked some type of productive disruption to the poverty trap described above.

The second criterion was variety. We wanted to see how communities of very different descriptions dealt with the

challenge of poverty. We believe we have succeeded in this area. The examples play out in a city of more than a million (Calgary) and a district of 50,000 residents (Saint-Michel in Montréal). They involve the collective efforts of organizations spread out over a sprawling region of a dozen communities (Niagara) and a network of networks in a single city (Hamilton). Some of the stories are about discrete projects (Surrey), while others focus on entire poverty reduction strategies (Saint John). Together the examples demonstrate that comprehensive efforts can focus on different demographic groups, are possible in different contexts, can operate on different scales, and can vary in breadth.

In the end, our investigation was fruitful. We uncovered four different strategies for tackling the interrelated cause-and-effects of poverty and a number of emerging leadership characteristics required for them to be effective. We also unexpectedly rediscovered the importance of other essential elements of the Vibrant Communities approach, for example, the role of high aspirations in community change efforts, the importance of multisector community engagement, and the practical challenges involved in evaluating poverty reduction work. These findings are described more fully in the final chapter.

The entire purpose of the ten-year Vibrant Communities venture was to systematically explore the potential and practical implications of adopting a new local approach to reducing poverty and to broadly disseminate whatever we might learn from our collective efforts. We believe the results of this study, only one of many studies to emerge from this initiative, make another small contribution to the poverty reduction movement in Canada. We hope the stories and lessons in this book will inspire and inform the efforts of many, whether activists, service agencies, local

poverty reduction networks of volunteers and organizations, foundations, or civil servants and politicians at all three levels of government.

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Note: For more information on the work of Vibrant Communities Canada, see <www.vibrant communities.ca>.