
DETERMINING THE VALUE OF COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

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POVERTY IS NOW PERCEIVED AS A CRITICAL ISSUE IN MUCH OF CANADA, WITH recent polls indicating that the majority of Canadians want to eradicate the problem (CCPA, 2008). Place-based, collaborative approaches are making a vital contribution to poverty reduction in communities across the country.

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) is the term given to groups of people working collaboratively to address complex problems that they are unable to tackle effectively on their own. Generally associated with poverty reduction and community revitalization, the “comprehensive” dimension means that people strive to combine strategic action or project work with systems-wide change that will ensure deep and durable outcomes. The “place-based” descriptor acknowledges that local economic, social, and historical contexts affect how each CCI’s work will unfold.

CCIs began to be formed in the late 1990s as people began to see that, despite a large and growing number of community organizations devoting themselves to issues such as homelessness, food security, and housing, poverty levels had remained high. Bringing people together to forge common goals and harness the energy of relationships offered a bold new way of operating.

CCIs generally include membership from government, community organizations, business, and people directly affected by the issue at hand. One example of a coordinated set of CCIs operating across Canada is Vibrant Communities – a poverty reduction action learning initiative founded in 2002 by Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Vibrant Communities continues to operate in 12 municipalities across Canada; its Ontario members include Opportunities Waterloo Region, Opportunities Niagara (active from 2002–2008) and the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction.

A second coordinated CCI, Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC), originated in 2005 as a two-year, multi-stakeholder project that ran in five cities (Surrey, Regina, Thunder Bay, Toronto, and Halifax). It was further developed by the United Way of Greater Toronto and now operates in numerous neighbourhoods in parts of that city, using grassroots participation to improve and enrich community life.

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PROVING ITS WORTH

Both Vibrant Communities and ANC took inspiration from CCI efforts under way in the US and UK. Part of VC's work in Ontario has included taking the CCI message to other cities, including Windsor, Peel Region, Kingston, and Peterborough. In 2010, Vibrant Communities' leadership felt that it was time to wrestle with the question of whether CCIs had proven themselves sufficiently robust and effective to be adopted as a poverty reduction methodology in communities of any size, anywhere in the country. On May 10-11, 2010, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement invited 46 business, government, philanthropic, academic, and community sector leaders to a gathering in Toronto. Participants reviewed the strengths and challenges of comprehensive local initiatives to reduce poverty in Canada and the US. The purpose was to determine whether working this way should become a major element of a national poverty reduction agenda.

STRENGTHS OF THE APPROACH

Place-based, comprehensive community initiatives provide a robust, multi-faceted response to an old problem. These initiatives have experienced success not only in moving the needle on poverty but also in mobilizing new partners and financial resources.

Changes in attitude demonstrate the power of CCIs to raise the profile of poverty and create mechanisms and forums where people from diverse backgrounds can work together to address it. Participants at the Toronto meeting were also quick to note that people with lived experience of poverty had not made the guest list. Their input at the solutions table is no longer seen as an option and there is a greater appetite to also include the

voices of Aboriginal communities. New Brunswick's recent work to establish a poverty reduction plan acknowledged that people with lived experience of poverty had become the fourth co-chair in the province's extensive engagement process. Several of them joined representatives from business, government, and the community sector in shaping the province's eventual Overcoming Poverty Together economic and social inclusion plan.

The Toronto meeting provided opportunities to hear details of what CCIs look like in tangible terms in specific communities. Anne Kubisch, director of the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Community Change, reviewed 20 years of American experience with comprehensive community initiatives (Kubisch et al., 2010). A paper prepared by the Wellesley Institute presented summary information about CCI work under way in Canada (Gardner et al., 2010). Both presentations identified CCIs as one of a number of models for structuring poverty reduction efforts. While not perfect, CCIs have made valuable contributions and allowed practitioners to learn important lessons about how to "do" poverty reduction.

BROADENING THE ENGAGEMENT AGENDA

- The language and results of the work – poverty, place-based, comprehensive community initiatives – must be explicit and easy to share among audiences.
- There may be a need to frame poverty in a way that makes it more relevant to a still wider range of people.
- Framing the work in a way that conveys a sense of possibility is important. Engendering a sense of urgency moves the work higher up the agenda and generates more forceful efforts to address the problem (e.g., impacts of poverty on health).
- People with lived experience of poverty are critical members of poverty reduction tables.
- Young Canadians may fail to relate to the experience of poverty. Older Canadians with lived experience of poverty may not fully understand today's poverty issues. Media has an important role to play in shaping our perceptions of the issue and encouraging empathy for people living on low incomes.

Maytree president Ratna Omidvar described work done by the Toronto Regional Immigrant Employment Council to break the logjam experienced by immigrant professionals trying to enter the Canadian labour market. United Way Canada president Al Hatton described the changes underway in his organization as its members seek better connection with the needs of Canadians in poverty. Community Foundations of Canada vice-president Jane Humphries spoke of new directions being charted by member foundations, including efforts to address the many health and prosperity challenges faced by Canada's Aboriginal communities.

On-the-ground programmatic initiatives were linked with efforts to bring about shifts in wider systems and policies. One of the more serious obstacles currently facing Canadians engaged in poverty reduction is the fiscal imbalance between what municipalities are funded to do and the expectations placed on them by residents and other levels of government. Local governments cannot undertake the work required to reduce poverty in the absence of sufficient funding. Participants were aware of the acute importance of the discussions under way to chart a path beyond the 2011 end of the current Canada Health and Social Transfer agreements.

The meeting included panel discussions with business and government representatives. Business is often the most difficult to engage in CCI work, but its organizational and logistical strengths make it an extremely valuable partner. Government participants highlighted the pressures associated with completing significant bodies of work within a three- or four-year political mandate. Communities are encouraged to invite government into ongoing discussions, rather than asking them to be part of a specific planning exercise. They should be well versed in research, build relationships of trust, and remain sensitive to the political landscape. The issues of departmental and staff reorganization, role confusion, and the alignment between administrative and political government representatives were highlighted.

With the exception of Prince Edward Island, provincial governments from Manitoba to Newfoundland have established poverty reduction plans. In western Canada, poverty is less openly discussed, though the issue of homelessness has garnered attention and resulted in action, particularly in Alberta. Increasing provincial government involvement in poverty reduction and the role played by local and national intermediaries helped build a sense among meeting participants that CCIs have successfully harnessed political, economic, and community forces to become a powerful weapon against poverty.

Vibrant Communities was identified as a model upon which sustainable poverty reduction work could be built. It has a nine-year history and a proven ability to forge strong relationships among local convening bodies. It provides a structure that is clear yet flexible, and – unique in Canada – has a politically neutral personality by virtue of being led by a non-government agency. One participant described Vibrant Communities as both “the glue for the front-line convening organizations” and “our ticket to success” should its conceptual framework be adopted more broadly.

GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

- Local governments cannot undertake the work required to reduce poverty in the absence of sufficient funding.
- Government reorganization, role confusion, and the alignment between administrative and political government representatives present obstacles to working collaboratively with government.
- Government can play a pivotal policy and enabling role in community collaborative efforts.

CHALLENGES OF THE APPROACH

Despite clear indications that the Toronto participants viewed CCIs as a promising approach to poverty reduction, they also recognized major obstacles, which must be addressed before the work can be taken to scale as part of a national poverty reduction strategy. First and foremost, the approach must be clearly stated so that key stakeholders can easily “sell” it to others.

The phrase “place-based, comprehensive community initiatives” does not roll easily into a clear understanding of the work under way to address poverty. Comprehensive is used to convey that the message that poverty is multidimensional and that many different factors need to be addressed in an orchestrated fashion. Community expresses the idea that solutions must be customized to different local contexts. Place-based refers to “the growing recognition that quality of place directly affects the well-being and success of individuals and families” (Torjman, 2007). The United Way of Greater Toronto’s 2004 *Poverty by Postal Code* report (co-authored with the Canadian Council on Social Development) helped build an understanding of the need to address deep levels of localized poverty.

Poverty reduction practitioners also grapple with how to define and measure poverty itself, an issue of particular interest to business partners used to working toward and measuring specific goals. Considerable work has been done to establish effective measures for reviewing progress on poverty reduction. The province of Ontario announced that it would use eight measures to assess movement on its poverty reduction plan, including the newly developed Ontario Deprivation Index. As a measure of its effectiveness, Vibrant Communities has used a rigorous accounting of five kinds of assets accumulated by individuals in their journeys out of poverty. (This work is based on the Sustainable Livelihoods framework, a model developed by the UK’s Department for International Development.)

Another facet of the measurement challenge is to consider whether it is possible to view poverty reduction efforts through a return on investment lens. Such a business-oriented approach does not easily translate to the many ripple effects associated with poverty reduction work. How, for example, is the return on investment calculated on a project in which business people mentor elementary school-aged children in the hopes that they graduate from high school? Considering such questions is part of the important work CCIs continuously undertake to align partners and the market and social forces that affect work in the area of poverty reduction.

Partly to ensure that the semantics of poverty do not divert energy away from the work itself, some initiatives – United Way of Greater Toronto’s Action for Neighbourhood Change, for example – use “community revitalization,” not poverty reduction, to define the overall goal of its efforts. Meeting participants considered the possibilities of framing poverty in a way that makes it relevant to a still wider range of people.

In April, 2010, the Hamilton Spectator published a series called “Code Red” that linked poverty with health outcomes and life expectancy. This work bookends the Spectator’s three-year poverty focus, an initiative that coincided with publisher Dana Robbins’ involvement with the Hamilton Community Foundation. “The Poverty Project” has helped

shatter old understandings of why people are poor and created spaces for conversation and participation in anti-poverty work. Dana reflected that the newspaper's work has also helped identify the different ways Canadians view the issue. Younger Canadians with no lived experience of poverty are less likely to understand or sympathize with (feel for) people struggling with low incomes. Older Canadians with lived experience do not fully understand today's poverty issues. In both cases, the media can play a key role in shaping attitudes and engendering empathy – a “feeling with” people living in poverty that encourages action and involvement.

The larger question of whether poverty should be reframed as a health issue generated considerable discussion. Participants also were concerned that the opportunities and successes of the work – rather than the negative associations usually ascribed to poverty – take precedence when describing and communicating CCI efforts.

Mark Chamberlain, president of Trivaris and co-chair of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, has come so far in his understanding of poverty that he describes its effects as “catastrophic” and now urges Canadians to consider the costs – in financial and human terms – of continued inaction. By contrast, University of Waterloo professor Frances Westley presented our current attitudinal paradox: If polls show clearly that Canadians want an end to poverty, why has there been so little action on the issue?

TAKING THE WORK FORWARD

The promising work undertaken by provincial governments stood as a strong indicator that the time is right in Canada to frame the work of CCIs more clearly and establish a framework for encouraging initiatives in communities of every size, in every province and territory. By meeting's end, there was also consensus about the need to initiate an ongoing national conversation about the best ways to support and advance local work – and about the poverty agenda more generally.

In summing up what makes CCIs sustainable, Tim Brodhead of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation identified their ability to build local institutional capacity and provide a model from which communities can learn, their success in leveraging local investment, and their ability to inspire a sense that change is possible. Undermining sustainability are questions around funding, the long timeframes required by the work, the central but poorly understood role of intermediaries, leadership fatigue, and a perception of indifference at the federal government level. Even with these daunting obstacles, the leaders gathered in Toronto expressed a desire to see the work continue and affirmed their commitment to participate in and assist “what comes next” efforts.

ACHIEVING GREATER IMPACT

- Articulating the values proposition – i.e., social values driving action instead of economic values – includes talking about the return on investment associated with poverty reduction work.
- The issue of poverty is multidimensional, and multiple factors need to be addressed in an orchestrated fashion.
- Practitioners must demonstrate what this looks like in tangible terms in specific communities including concrete initiatives that are generating real improvements in people's lives.
- It is critical to link on-the-ground programmatic initiatives and efforts to shift wider systems and policies.

MOMENTUM

- Local and national intermediaries are needed to frame the work, set goals, provide strategic help, and links to research.
- Provincial poverty reduction and social inclusion plans provide continued impetus for advancing the poverty reduction agenda in a growing number of jurisdictions.

Participants agreed that a case must be built that articulates the gap we are experiencing between our values (no poverty) and our practice (business as usual). Making values drive the economics rather than the reverse and recognizing that for many of the participants the will is already there begged the question of how to roll CCIs out across the country.

New Brunswick Deputy Minister of Social Development James Hughes effectively summed up the meeting with the phrase: “Where there’s a way, there’s a will.” The challenge now is to identify specifically who will do what to take the work forward.

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