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Who Does What in Comprehensive Community Initiatives?

by

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role that various sectors play in comprehensive community initiatives. It is one of a series of papers written in support of the Vibrant Communities project.

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

Selected conveners from 14 cities across the country are involved in a Pan-Canadian Learning Partnership in which they come together on a monthly basis to share ideas, resources and strategies. (A community in Newfoundland is being approached for participation in this national learning partnership.) They effectively 'scale up' their individual efforts through this collaborative strategic approach.

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

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

These initiatives are described in more detail in a related paper [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003a]. Briefly, they seek to engage diverse sectors in working together on a collaborative basis, over the long term, to tackle a wide range of interrelated issues. Comprehensive community initiatives have emerged both in response to recent practices that have proven ineffective and as a reformulation of approaches to community development that have been tried in the past. They also reflect views on the changing role of government and the place of communities in promoting economic and social well-being.

One of the most important features of comprehensive community initiatives is that they encourage partnering and collaborative work. Alliances among disciplines, sectors and community members help

promote comprehensive solutions to economic, social and environmental problems. Collaborative relationships create value by bringing new resources, insights and expertise to the table.

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

Typically, comprehensive community initiatives are governed by a coordinating mechanism in the form of a leadership roundtable or steering group. This governing body assumes responsibility for acting as champion of the identified issue, convening key players, setting out a vision for the effort and associated strategic plan, and acting as the liaison between the broader community (including the media) and the local initiative.

At the very least, the coordinating mechanism is multi-organizational in nature; at best, it is multisectoral in that it engages representatives of diverse sectors including citizens and citizens' organizations, governments, business and the voluntary sector. This paper explores the roles that various sectors can play in reducing poverty.

People Living in Poverty

Strong and caring communities start with the citizen as the base. Citizens effectively create the threads of caring communities when they invest their time and resources in issues that concern them. Governments typically seek to engage citizens in community processes by involving them in consultations. A consultation paper is prepared and citizens are invited to a one-time meeting at which they have an opportunity to state no more than a few sentences of opinion.

But these consultation processes usually take place after the fact. Citizens are brought together to select among various options (and often there is a preferred option implicitly on the table). Rarely are they engaged in defining the issues of concern to them and developing policy options. Ironically, the most important dimension of community work lies in the definition of the problem being addressed.

There are many efforts under way throughout the country to enhance employment and income opportunities for low-income Canadians. Yet those who are the 'targets' of the work rarely

are engaged in shaping these efforts – identifying their concerns and the solutions they consider to be the most appropriate.

Vibrant Communities seeks to reverse this exclusion by requiring that persons who live in poverty participate on the steering committees devising local plans for poverty reduction. As noted, Trail Builder communities must engage representatives from at least four sectors to receive funding, including groups of persons living in poverty. All the work undertaken as part of this national initiative focuses upon improving the work opportunities, housing, social supports and life prospects of households with low incomes – drawing on their knowledge and expertise as a major guiding force. In fact, resident participation is deemed critical to the success of such initiatives:

> Resident involvement is the only reliable indication that the change agenda will indeed be connected to the genuine needs of the community, and that the community-building solutions will have an impact. While organizations and neighborhood leaders are critical stakeholders, any effort will fail if there is not a genuine and vocal resident base [Traynor 2002: 14].

In addition to participating on local governance bodies, Vibrant Communities encourages low-income individuals to join web-based discussions on various aspects of poverty. The following letter, for example, was contributed to the Vibrant Communities website by Frank Mowatt. Frank is an active member of the project and a founding member of Opportunities 2000 (OP2000), an early Canadian experiment with comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction. Frank was addressing this letter to those participating in a web-based discussion on the Vibrant Communities website.

> My name is Frank Mowatt, and I have been around for 61 years. I have been diagnosed with clinical depression, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma and osteoarthritis. I do not believe my health status takes away my right to meaningful employment, nor does it mean that I must experience living in poverty. I have been involved in the poverty syndrome for a number of years – that includes both fighting and living the experience. During this period, I have survived in various ways such as: the good will of friends and family, welfare, disability and working. At the same time, I have been involved in the process of alleviating or reducing the numbers of those experiencing a life of poverty, within the Region of Waterloo. I have volunteered my time and expertise "on living in poverty" by being a part of Opportunities Planning, a member of OP2000, Co-Chair of the Leadership Roundtable for OP2000 and most recently involved with Vibrant Communities.
>
> We, the people in poverty, have a role to play, as we are the experts of being there, what is keeping us there and how to keep our children and their children out of there. My feeling, and that of many others around me, is that the alleviation of poverty is an attempt to create better off "happy poor people." How many people do you know who are happy "living in poverty"? Hence, we feel that our goal should be to reduce or eliminate poverty instead of putting our energy towards the alleviation of it. My question is: How do we get more experts (us) involved in this process? Hopefully, with your help, we will come up with an effective process for this to happen.

Perhaps one way for this to be done is for people across the country to tell their story or list the barriers that tie them to the "poverty train" – become one voice where we speak out and let the powers that be know that we have an inherent right not to be "living in poverty"; whereby we experience a "quality of life" that includes the right to decent housing, utilities, safe child care services, health care, education and access to all leisure activities.

Recognizing that there are many diverse as well as similar issues that provide fuel for the "poverty train," we must as a group shut down the power supply. I feel that one way to do this is by coming together and creating a caboose for that train – a caboose that will not allow any more cars to join the train and, at the same time, will drop cars off on our journey out of poverty.

In order to accomplish this we could form a "National Community Action Team" facilitated by members of Vibrant Communities which consists of people who presently experience or have experienced "living in poverty." A few of the challenges facing us are to:

- Find out what is working and what is not working.
- Rid ourselves of the stigma that states that because we "live in poverty," we are second-class citizens and are a drain on the public purse.
- Assure our peers and ourselves that we are equal partners in the fight against poverty.
- Find ways to reach out to those "living in poverty" who are unaware of our fight or have accepted poverty as a way of life.

Your fight is my fight, our fight. All responses will be greatly appreciated. Let us stand up and be counted.

In addition to sharing their ideas through web-based discussions, opportunities are created for low-income residents to shape the direction of the poverty reduction initiatives in their respective communities. In Victoria, for instance, the Quality of Life Challenge has created a reference group of people living on low income. Members of the reference group meet regularly to review the work of the initiative and provide advice. They also review all communication materials developed by the Quality of Life Challenge, including its website, to identify problems in the way the issues are presented and to suggest alternatives.

Similarly, Opportunities 2000 established the Community Action Team (CAT), a working group composed primarily of low-income residents. It offered feedback to the wider initiative on particular issues and strategies. For example, the CAT group expressed reservations about the idea of advocating for free bus passes for low-income residents. The group provided input to evaluators not only about the strengths and weaknesses of the overall initiative but also about the tools employed in the evaluation process. CAT helped prepare resources of interest to low-income residents, including a booklet identifying valuable programs and workshops on the skills required to serve as board and committee members with community organizations.

In Saskatoon, the Core Neighbourhood Development Council conducted a community planning process that involved residents of low-income neighbourhoods in formulating a 20-year

vision for the community. The process enabled residents to participate in many different ways. Over the course of a year, the Council held a series of focus groups, administered a household survey and sponsored public meetings to air issues and determine priorities. It also distributed a newsletter with updates on the planning process and opportunities to become involved. Residents helped shape and implement the process, including conducting the door-to-door surveys.

One partner in the Core Neighbourhood Development Council, the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition, has been engaged in a similar initiative. It has created opportunities for low-income residents to participate in the development of public policy related specifically to provincial social services.

In partnership with the Saskatoon regional office of Saskatchewan Social Services, the Coalition sponsored a series of community forums that asked social assistance recipients, low-income individuals, grassroots partner organizations and other concerned groups to identify the 'roots of poverty' and propose ways that the province's income security policies could be reformed to address more effectively these challenges. The process also was used to build the research capacity of participants, create stronger links between the community and government agencies, and establish an ongoing process for low-income residents to participate in policy making [Stensrud and Grosso 2002].

Special projects sometimes are required to ensure that community-based poverty reduction includes all demographic and socioeconomic groups. With funding from Status of Women Canada, Vibrant Communities has undertaken a Gender and Poverty Project that strengthens the capacity of communities to address the gender dimensions of poverty. Low-income women have participated directly in conducting research and organizing workshops on gender and poverty.

The workshops have used a participatory, popular education process to generate discussion among participants as they construct visual images of the gender dimensions of poverty. All workshops have involved low-income women and men along with others in their community concerned about poverty. Some workshops focus upon a particular group within the community. In Victoria, a session was held with persons with disabilities; in Halifax, a workshop will address the African Nova Scotian experience.

People in poverty are using various forms of popular education to help community members understand their experience. The Cornerstone Community Association in Ottawa, for example, has worked with homeless individuals to develop the 'Homeless Maze,' an educational workshop that employs role-playing to convey the realities of homelessness. Homeless or formerly homeless people assume the role of social worker or emergency shelter staff while workshop participants play the role of the homeless. The Maze has been used with church groups, local government officials and other community members to raise awareness about homelessness.

The engagement of low-income residents has proven to be a significant challenge for comprehensive community initiatives. Some observers suggest that community organizing has become something of a lost art, partly because some funders are reluctant to invest in the community engagement process at the core of this work. Others point to the multiple concerns facing people living in poverty – financial pressures, health issues and meeting basic needs for food and shelter – that constrain their ability to participate in such activities on a consistent basis.

Based on a review of the US experience, the Aspen Institute argues that comprehensive community initiatives need to take a flexible approach to citizen engagement. "The goal of community mobilization should not be to engage all residents or to involve everyone in the same way. Those who want to participate will have different levels of interest and ability to commit" [Kubisch et al. 2002: 42]. Various roles are possible – e.g., serving on the leadership body or working groups, providing a staffing function such as outreach work or community organizing, participating in a reference group, responding to community surveys or attending occasional public meetings.

Engaging the Private Sector

Poverty reduction is also the business of business. A community with high rates of poverty is not reaching its economic potential. It may have difficulty creating a 'quality place' that attracts talent [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003b]. It may experience higher rates of crime in certain neighbourhoods.

But there is another, more direct, reason for private sector concern with social issues. Companies that show interest in local and global issues have found that their employees report greater loyalty to the organization. They believe that they are working for an employer who cares about the broader community and many feel motivated to support the company in its efforts.

There is yet another argument for private sector involvement in social issues. The burgeoning corporate social responsibility movement seeks to promote responsible behaviour around employment standards and business practice [Walker 1999]. There is growing awareness of the power of socially conscious investment to influence corporate performance. Investors can choose to support companies that pay attention not only to the financial bottom line but also to their social and environmental records.

What can the private sector do to contribute to comprehensive community initiatives to reduce poverty? Preliminary research into the growing area of business involvement suggests that there are at least five options: contribution of time, resources and expertise; strategic procurement; untapped markets; progressive human resource practices; and integrated approaches.

a. Time, Resources and Expertise

Business can contribute to community initiatives through the direct involvement of time and resources. In British Columbia, for example, Coast Capital Credit Union has supported persons with disabilities in their efforts to establish small businesses. The credit union entered into an arrangement with Western Economic Diversification Canada (WD) to deliver the 'Advice and Business Loans for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities' program. It administers loans of up to $75,000 to entrepreneurs with self-declared disabilities.

In this partnership, WD contributions help pay for managers' salaries, marketing activities and the costs associated with operating an advisory committee. WD also provides a loan loss reserve. In return, the financial institutions make in-kind services and donations, such as office space and administrative support. A critical component of the initiative is the professional advice and mentorship offered by credit union staff members [Makhoul 2002].

More recently, Coast Capital has made investments to strengthen the capacity of communities to reduce poverty more strategically and aggressively. The organization currently is funding and participating in the Quality of Life Challenge – a multi-year effort to improve housing and income opportunities for residents in BC's Capital Region and to strengthen the social fabric of the community [*http://www.qolchallenge.ca*].

While financial resources are important, the time, energy and leadership of the business sector sometimes represent an even greater contribution. In Saint John, for example, a network of more than 100 businesses came together in 1997 to form the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI). Based on a thorough analysis of poverty trends, current poverty reduction initiatives and feedback from low-income residents, BCAPI decided to focus its attention initially upon the circumstances of teenaged single mothers.

BCAPI has worked with nonprofit organizations to strengthen their capacity to assist low-income residents and encouraged the provincial government to remove barriers that make it difficult for welfare recipients to move into the labour market. It also has encouraged local businesses to examine how they can create economic opportunities for disadvantaged residents. BCAPI has helped secure 40 new jobs within larger established businesses for low-income residents.

b. Strategic Procurement

Businesses can reduce poverty by strategically seeking out opportunities to purchase even a fraction of their goods and services from firms owned or staffed by people living in or at risk of poverty.

Many businesses in Kitchener-Waterloo, for example, contract with Morning Glory Café to provide refreshments and meals for office meetings and celebrations. Morning Glory is a community enterprise run by Ray of Hope which trains and employs homeless and at-risk youth in the area of restaurant services. Contracts with private enterprises, such as Clarica, provide opportunities to practise basic job skills and help the Café generate the revenues it needs to be sustainable [*http://www.rayofhope.net/morningglory.html*].

Some companies engage in progressive procurement on a larger scale. IBM in Houston, Texas, for example, works with the National Minority Supplier Development Council to purchase nearly $2 billion of goods and services annually from women-owned and minority enterprises – e.g., African, Asian and Native Americans, and persons with disabilities. In fact, IBM has gone so far as to make 'supplier diversity goals' a performance measurement for managers. In 2000, ten organizations in the US counted $1 billion or more in business with minority and women-owned enterprises [Ford Foundation 2002].

A pioneering initiative in Vancouver is taking the progressive procurement idea one step further in order to generate benefits for the distressed community of Downtown Eastside Vancouver. A nonprofit organization, Fast Track for Employment, has partnered with BC Technology Social Venture Partners, a charitable foundation created by BC's technology sector, to develop the Social Purchasing Portal. The Portal is a website that links purchasers and suppliers. Well-established companies exercise corporate social responsibility by adding 'social value' to their list of criteria when deciding where to purchase goods and services. They use the Portal to identify businesses that hire hard-to-employ and long-term unemployed workers from local employment training agencies.

At least some of the participating suppliers are Downtown Eastside businesses. Cook Studio Catering, for instance, is a local caterer that also acts as a training program for welfare recipients and at-risk youth. Cook Studio has expanded significantly its sales during its first year in operation through contracts secured via the Social Purchasing Portal. In this case, the Social Purchasing Portal is creating training and employment opportunities for the residents of the Downtown Eastside and contributing to economic revitalization by helping to establish a local business.

c. Untapped Markets

Businesses also can seek to ensure that low-income residents have access to essential services at a reasonable cost. While all businesses strive to find a balance between generating profits for themselves and ensuring affordability for consumers, some deliberately look for other ways to reduce the financial barriers experienced by marginalized people and families.

There is a 100-year tradition of creating businesses that focus on just that balance – it is called the consumer co-operative movement. Thousands of member-driven enterprises strive to operate as sustainable businesses while providing high-quality affordable housing, insurance, banking services, food and household items to low- and modest-income Canadians.

Even traditional businesses can play a role. The partnership between the RBC Royal Bank and a community project in the Parkdale neighbourhood in Toronto is another example. In an effort to partially address the lack of local banking branches, the organizations have created Cash & Save – an outlet run by the RBC Royal Bank that allows customers to pay bills, cash cheques and carry out other financial transactions for a fraction of the regular cost. As a result, low-income residents keep more of their limited income; the bank generates revenue and some profit, and builds a future customer base for its traditional services.

d. Progressive Human Resource Practices

Perhaps one of the most effective ways for businesses to reduce poverty is by examining their own employment practices. The private sector employs millions of Canadians. Small adjustments in the methods which businesses employ to recruit, train, pay and support their workers can make big differences in economic and social well-being.

Local companies and human resources practitioners involved in Opportunities 2000 identified various means by which employers could improve the quality of life of their employees and strengthen their businesses at the same time [Weinert 1999]. One of the chief ways is to pay decent wages.

Since the mid-1990s, a living wage movement has been gaining momentum across North America and elsewhere. While somewhat new to Canada, this movement is particularly strong in the US. Hundreds of businesses in that country voluntarily have adopted living wage covenants. At least 62 living wage ordinances have been established by cities, counties and school districts in 24 states. Such ordinances require that employers who receive contracts or financial support from local governments pay their workers a 'living wage.' While the required wage level varies by jurisdiction, the rate generally is well above the prevailing minimum wage [Employment Policy Foundation 2003].

The impetus behind the living wage movement is the recognition that the 1990s saw a significant increase in the ranks of the working poor. Most low-income families – 52.4 percent – are working poor, headed by people who work either full time (20.9 percent) or part time (31.5 percent). Moreover, 51.3 percent of low-income unattached Canadians are working poor, with 14.2 percent employed on a full-time basis and 37.1 percent working part time [Battle and Torjman 2004]. The

problem is partly the result of the gap between 'good' and 'bad' jobs in which the latter are associated with casual and part-time hours, low wages and few benefits.

Another culprit is the minimum wage. In 2001, the after-tax income of a minimum wage worker – both from wages and refundable tax credits – fell short of the poverty line for the largest city in every province. In addition, "contrary to what some people believe, the archetypical minimum wage worker is not a middle-class teenager working after school for pocket money. Sixteen percent of minimum wage workers are between the ages of 20 and 24, and a further 37 percent are 25 years of age and older" [Battle 2003: 262].

Local governments either can implement living wage ordinances that require employers to pay more adequate wages or can support living wage advocates in promoting the voluntary adoption of living wage covenants.

> The Living Wage movement arose to deal with the problem that privatization of public services often results in large wage cuts for workers who are moved from the public to the private sector. To add insult to injury, some local governments have tried to attract businesses to their community by offering subsidies and tax incentives; research suggests that the jobs created by economic development subsidies pay less than the norm for their industry. Living Wage ordinances are intended to prevent city and county governments from contracting with or subsidizing private sector employers that pay low wages which guarantee working poverty [Battle 2003: 259].

Employers can offer benefits in the form of health, dental and disability insurance. Pro-rated benefits can be made available to employees working less than full time. The provision of health-related benefits is crucial, especially for individuals trying to make the transition from welfare to work. Welfare typically covers these additional costs while paid work often does not. As a result, many low-wage employees find that they are financially worse off working if they must cover the costs of health- and disability-related items from their meagre pay cheques.

Employers also can help offset work-related costs through arranging carpools and providing bus pass subsidies (in lieu of parking spaces). Flexible working time enables the accommodation of child care responsibilities and may lower potential costs to employees.

Another important contribution: Employers can consider alternatives to layoffs. Employers can make layoff a last-resort solution through alternatives such as a shorter workweek or job sharing for those who prefer this arrangement because of caregiving responsibilities. A reduction in the use of overtime can help create new jobs. Community-based early warning systems can help detect companies that may be in trouble and organize preventive rescue missions before the problem actually occurs.

In the late 1980s, for example, a community development corporation called RÉSO (*Regroupement pour la relance économique et social du sud-ouest de Montréal*) developed an early warning system to counteract the dramatic decline of business in an economically vulnerable part of

Montreal. Trade union members were encouraged to contact RÉSO about businesses that seemed to be experiencing difficulties, such as an owner retiring with no apparent successor in place, financial troubles or worker layoffs. In these cases, RÉSO staff would offer technical assistance in product development, marketing or other aspects of business operation.

e. *Integrated Approaches*

Many companies have chosen to employ more than one strategy to reduce poverty. In the process, they have demonstrated the substantial impact a private sector organization actually can make. One of the most high-profile ventures is Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream. While well known for its ice cream, the company is also an undisputed leader in creating opportunities for marginalized residents and communities [*http://www.benjerry.com/our_company/about_us/social_mission*].

Through its *PartnerShops* program, Ben & Jerry's develops agreements with nonprofit groups interested in running businesses that provide employment, training and entrepreneurial experiences to youth considered 'at risk.' The company waives its normal franchise fee, enables marginalized youth to participate in a legitimate and high-profile business, and allows the organizations to use the profits to support their programs.

In its *For A Change* initiative, Ben & Jerry's procures materials from small-scale farmers and progressive enterprises that promote environmental, social and economic sustainability. The company purchases its brownie flavours and desserts, for example, from Greystone Bakery, a social mission driven company that hires people typically unable to find and secure employment.

The Ben & Jerry's Foundation directs more than $1 million in grants to groups that seek to address the root causes of social and environmental problems. In 2003, for instance, the Foundation provided a grant to the Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network in Sacramento – a member-led association of the working poor, composed of 50 culturally and racially diverse organizations. Foundation funding was provided in support of the Youth Organizer Training Institute, which provides a major training ground for emerging leadership of the Network's base organizations [*http://www.benjerry.com/foundation/2003_cycle1.html*].

There are well-known companies in Canada that also employ an integrated approach to reducing poverty. Syncrude Canada, for example, has designed a variety of initiatives to create opportunities for Aboriginal peoples, develop a skilled and accessible workforce, and strengthen relations with Aboriginal communities in northern Alberta [Syncrude Canada 2002].

Through its Community Development and Education program, Syncrude funds a variety of scholarships to improve the literacy, graduation rates and university participation of Aboriginal

students. By means of programs such as Aboriginal Future Leaders, the company supports leadership training and practicum opportunities for young Aboriginal leaders ages 18 to 24. Syncrude also funded the construction of a drop-in facility in Fort McMurray in order to provide recreational opportunities for at-risk youth.

Syncrude sponsors a variety of apprenticeship and co-operative programs for Aboriginal youth that combine employment, training and academic achievement. The company automatically hires graduates of its High School Registered Apprenticeship Program. Syncrude actively recruits Aboriginal people for positions in the trades and professions; 10 percent of its employees are Aboriginal and the company is Canada's largest industrial employer of Aboriginal people.

Syncrude also procures services from Aboriginal organizations and enterprises. The company has developed a customized business relationship with Denesolene, a business owned by the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, which provides waste management and janitorial services. The Chief of the First Nation community attributes the special relationship with Syncrude as a key factor that enabled Denesolene to grow from seven employees in 1993 to well over 200 in 2002. Syncrude has developed similar relationships with other community and privately owned Aboriginal enterprises worth $92 million in 2001.

The role of organized labour should be recognized as part of the private sector contribution to poverty reduction. Organized labour promotes social development in many ways, including through its influence upon the private sector. Labour has negotiated private benefits that often are applied to other workers and sectors. It helps establish a reasonable wage floor and has sought the reduction of wage differentials among groups of workers. Labour has fought for safe and healthy working conditions and has promoted democratic decision-making in the workplace. It also has been an active player with the voluntary sector in supporting community action. Labour-sponsored venture capital funds have provided start-up support to many new businesses.

Federal Government

While communities can do a lot, they cannot do it all. Governments at all levels make essential contributions to reducing poverty and creating vibrant communities.

Local governments, for example, are especially important in the areas of recreation, the arts, community events and accessible neighbourhoods. This multifaceted responsibility is discussed in a recent publication *The Social Role of Local Government* [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003c]. Provincial and territorial governments help ensure the presence of services like education, child care and early childhood development, and health care. This paper focuses primarily upon the federal government, which has three major roles in helping to reduce poverty: leader, investor and enabler.

a. Leader

As *leader*, the federal government can translate into action the international obligations to which it is signatory. Canada has signed and ratified a series of international covenants, including the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966) and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966). These three instruments comprise the *International Bill of Rights*; they define and establish basic human rights and fundamental freedoms. Through their signatures, nations accept responsibility to fulfill the obligations set out in these covenants.

Article 25 within the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* gives everyone the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care, and necessary social services. At least 12 different texts adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations explicitly recognize the right to adequate housing alone [Osberg 2001].

The protections afforded under the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* are especially relevant to social development. Article 11 recognizes the right of all citizens to a decent standard of living, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. Article 12 specifies the right of everyone to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Article 13 recognizes the right of all to education. The articles set clear obligations on governments to ensure that these human rights are met. The federal government can take direct action through direct investment and by enabling the capacity of communities to meet their goals.

b. Investor

There are three major areas in which the federal government can make direct investments to reduce poverty: child poverty, early childhood development and decent affordable housing.

The federal government has made important progress in reducing child poverty through its support for the National Child Benefit and must continue to enhance these payments. The maximum Canada Child Tax Benefit payment will rise from $2,632 in July 2003 for the first child to a projected $3,243 in July 2007. The maximum benefit for a second child goes from $2,423 in 2003 to $3,016 in 2007, and for the third and each additional child from $2,427 to $3,020 over that period [Battle, Torjman and Mendelson 2003].

The Caledon Institute has proposed that an adequate child benefit should offset the cost of raising a child in a low-income family, estimated conservatively at $4,400 per year. The 2003

Budget put the federal government well on the road to an adequate child benefit by committing to a series of increases that will reach $3,243 by 2007 [Battle, Torjman and Mendelson 2003].

There is substantial research evidence pointing to the need for investment in early childhood development. Opportunities are created or denied in children's critical early years, when their development is forged along multiple dimensions – physical, emotional, social, linguistic and intellectual.

Early childhood development has been shown to improve children's subsequent performance in school, lessen the learning risks linked to low income and enhance parents' childrearing and coping skills. Early childhood development is not just for families whose parents are in the workforce: These services also can help families that care for their children at home [Battle and Torjman 2003]. The social and economic benefits of high-quality child care, in particular, are well documented [Cleveland and Krashinsky 1998].

Public investments in high-quality early childhood programs benefit not only parents and children. Societal gains include the long-term impact of enhanced childhood development, economic productivity and lower costs of supports, like social assistance and social services. The public benefit also comes from the increased workforce participation of parents, higher tax revenues to government and greater economic security for mothers.

The federal government must sustain its commitment to building an early childhood development system throughout the country. The 2003 federal Budget allocated a total of $935 million over five years to child care, consisting of $900 million to the provinces and territories and $35 million for First Nations children. This was an improvement on the original, virtually no-conditions Early Childhood Development Agreement of 2000, which provided $2.2 billion of federal money over five years to help the provinces and territories enhance their early childhood development services. But the new money announced for child care is modest given the enormity of the need, and may not be sufficient to bring all the provincial and territorial governments to the table [Battle, Torjman and Mendelson 2003]. The 2004 Speech from the Throne signalled the federal government's intent to enhance its involvement in early childhood development, particularly with respect to child care.

Finally, Ottawa must continue to invest in affordable accommodation to ensure that all children and families have a house – the stable foundation for a home. This investment is particularly important for Aboriginal Canadians who face a serious shortage of decent affordable housing [Battle, Torjman and Mendelson 2003].

There is substantial evidence on the health, social and economic benefits of decent affordable housing. Dozens of studies corroborate the profound and far-reaching connections between housing and well-being. A wide range of research points to the effects of unsafe and unhealthy housing.

Poorly maintained housing is responsible for many childhood injuries. Damp, moldy interiors are linked to higher risk of respiratory disease and asthma. Unstable living arrangements, made worse by parents' inability to pay the rent, have a deeply negative impact upon the emotional, behavioural and cognitive development of children.

The 2003 federal Budget announced three new measures related to affordable housing and support for the homeless. Under the Affordable Housing Initiative, Ottawa made a commitment to invest $320 million over five years to build the supply of affordable rental housing. This money was in addition to the $680 million that Ottawa had put on a federal-provincial table in November 2001 for low-cost housing. This was a significant announcement in that it signalled the federal intent to increase the supply of decent affordable housing. The Budget also committed $128 million a year over three years for repair and renewal of the existing housing stock.

The Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative was renewed for three years. Introduced in 1999, this program provides funds to communities to help them tackle the complex problem of homelessness. While this measure is important, the real way to make a dent in homelessness in the long term is to ensure that the first two pillars of the housing architecture are solid. A crucial step is to ensure the availability of affordable housing that provides more than just temporary shelter – but a real home.

c. Enabler

Finally, the federal government can play a crucial enabling role in reducing poverty by supporting the capacity of communities to convene key players [Torjman 2004]. They, in turn, combine their ideas and resources to devise local solutions to reduce poverty. One way for Ottawa to support this capacity is by providing coaching assistance to help communities identify their assets, develop strategic plans and assess progress against their identified objectives. The federal government also can assist communities make links with each other in order to encourage learning and the exchange of good practice.

Technical assistance (often referred to in the literature as 'coaching') is required in two major areas. The first set of skills pertains to the processes involved in local decision-making. These generic skills include engaging partners from diverse sectors, involving marginalized groups, developing strategic action plans, raising funds, creating local learning networks, and devising evaluation plans and monitoring systems for the project. Technical assistance in specific areas focuses upon key 'technologies' related to substantive interventions, such as creating affordable housing, setting up licensed child care, financing a community loan fund or organizing a home care co-operative.

Governments have substantial expertise to offer to communities arising from their work in the collection, storage and analysis of information. National labour market surveys, for example, cannot be readily disaggregated to individual communities. But the federal government can provide guidance in helping selected neighbourhoods determine their labour market trends and emerging skill needs.

In fact, communities require access to up-to-date local data about all facets of community life. While much of this data exists, it can be costly, technically difficult and time consuming to obtain. Special purchases can be made from Statistics Canada but data acquired in this way often comes in 'raw' form that requires processing by someone with relevant expertise.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the provincial government has created a mechanism to provide extensive data without charge to local communities. Community Accounts make available a wide range of data organized by locality and region. The initiative is linked to the province's Strategic Social Plan, which takes an integrated approach to addressing social and economic issues, and promotes collaboration among a range of government and community agencies. Enhanced access to information through Community Accounts has animated involvement in local concerns and provided an evidence-based foundation for government/community discussion about these issues.

Community engagement can succeed in the long run only if it takes place within a supportive policy context. The policy dimensions of community work often are overlooked even though these have a profound impact upon the ability of communities to find effective solutions to the issues they are addressing. The federal government can support the policy component of the work as it currently does, for example, through the contribution that Human Resources Development Canada makes to the Caledon Institute in respect of the Vibrant Communities project.

There are several components to effective policy work. One important dimension involves the exploration of policies that are supportive of local solutions to neighbourhood renewal. This research may pertain to community building generally (e.g., financing arrangements and evaluation practices) or to selected substantive policy areas (e.g., income security, child care, housing and crime prevention).

A related dimension involves the identification of policy barriers that impede effective community interventions. Barriers that inadvertently may be embedded in housing or welfare policies make it difficult to create affordable housing or to help people move into paid employment. One analyst has identified four basic design challenges for government programs serving communities:

1. Distance Problem – Decision-making from outside the community reinforces dependency and fails to take advantage of local knowledge.

2. Responsible Management Problem – Programs often are defined to such specific standards that there is insufficient room to adapt them to local circumstances.

3. Specialized Mandate Problem – A narrow set of interventions is used when a multifaceted orchestration of a variety of tools actually is required.

4. The Problem of Program Commitment – Community development is a long-term process but government commitments are often relatively short term [Perry 2001].

Governments have begun to explore ways to more effectively support multifaceted community initiatives. Experiments in horizontal management, such as Nova Scotia's Sustainable Communities Initiative, are changing the culture and operating practices of government to better enable departments and levels of government to pool their energies in support of holistic local development strategies. The Sustainable Communities Initiative has brought federal, provincial, municipal and First Nations governments together to help communities address sustainability issues – economic, social, cultural and environmental.

Other governments have taken similar steps. The province of Manitoba has established a Community and Economic Development Initiative that employs an integrated social and economic lens for shaping government policies and programs. An interdepartmental committee of Cabinet oversees the initiative and provides a forum for key decision-makers to align the efforts of their various departments and agencies.

Similarly, the Strategic Social Plan in Newfoundland and Labrador has put forward an integrated social and economic vision for the province. A collaborative effort across provincial departments is used to bolster 'regional steering committees' which bring together key government and community agencies to design and undertake local plans for social and economic development.

Such collaboration across departments and levels of government is required if innovative community initiatives are to realize their potential. Based on extensive study of such initiatives in the US, social analyst Lisbeth Schorr argues that there have been many successful community-based strategies for tackling social and economic issues. As demonstration projects, these strategies can function outside of the routine procedures of government. They are able to operate across traditional boundaries and have the leeway to apply judgment and creativity in how they address community issues.

But once the effectiveness of these projects has been proven and they attempt to go to scale, they often must conform to conventional operating procedures which undermine the very flexibility that led to their effectiveness in the first place [Schorr 1997]. Governments can help by adopting horizontal management strategies sensitive to the dynamics of community initiatives.

Creating collaborative working relationships among departments and between governments and community groups requires opportunities for discussion and mutual learning. In Vibrant Communities, a policy dialogue is providing the forum for this interaction. Monthly policy dialogue meetings are held with representatives from federal, provincial and municipal governments, and community members from Vibrant Communities. Participants include Human Resources Development, Health, Justice, Status of Women, Citizenship and Immigration, Privy Council Office, Indian and Northern Affairs, Industry Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

Voluntary Sector

The estimated 180,000 groups and organizations that comprise the voluntary sector in Canada are highly diverse. Groups and organizations in the voluntary sector assume many important functions, including direct service delivery, convening and ethical leadership. While the voluntary sector operates widely in the environmental, cultural, recreational and political spheres, many organizations are involved in direct service delivery in the health and social areas in particular. Programs include home care, school breakfasts, mentoring and literacy.

a. Service Provider

Sometimes these services are provided on behalf of government. Child care, home care and various forms of training typically are paid for by governments and delivered by voluntary organizations. Public provision through the nonprofit sector can make services more responsive to the needs of families and communities (e.g., government funding for transition houses run by volunteer boards).

Voluntary organizations have initiated literally thousands of community programs. Quint Development Corporation in Saskatoon, for instance, has renovated single-family homes to enable affordable home ownership for members of Saskatoon's core neighbourhoods. Lutherwood CODA in Waterloo Region runs an extensive employment program that provides job search assistance, career counselling, and access to training and support for self-employment ventures. The Edmonton Community Loan Fund assists residents who are starting up small businesses. The Human Development Council in Saint John operates a community centre called INFO-line with information

about community services including self-help groups, counselling, neighbourhood organizations and volunteer opportunities.

Direct service delivery is only one way in which voluntary organizations can improve community conditions. But these organizations run the risk of being overwhelmed by service delivery responsibilities if they let governments 'off the hook' by filling the gaps left by inadequate or under-funded public services.

b. Convener

Voluntary organizations are more than just 'doers.' They also are in a position to get things done. They make things happen by acting as conveners that can bring together diverse players – e.g., private business and sectoral council representatives, labour, the education/training sector, social organizations and anti-poverty groups, and federal and provincial governments.

Organizations such as United Ways and social planning councils are recognizing how well positioned they are to play a convening role. United Ways, for instance, have broad and diverse networks within their communities. While these networks typically focus upon raising and distributing funds, they also can be mobilized for collaborative problem-solving and creating coordinated responses to identified challenges.

In Vibrant Communities, United Ways in Surrey, Calgary and Winnipeg all have assumed the responsibility of local convener. In addition, *Centraide du Grand Montréal* has played a pivotal role by supporting a multisectoral roundtable in the neighbourhood of Saint Michel. This work was part of a larger process in which *Centraide* partnered with the City of Montréal and the Regional Health and Social Services Board of Montréal-Centre to encourage multisectoral action in support of social development.

Through the Social Capital Project, the Social Planning Network of Ontario has explored social planning councils as convening bodies seeking to build the social capital of their communities. The councils bring a variety of resources to such efforts, including relationships of trust with many organizations and a policy research perspective that can articulate the broader significance of certain issues or projects [*http://www.lks.net/~cdc/scapital/Index.html*].

In Victoria, the Community Social Planning Council (Community Council) has played the convener role in a number of initiatives. In Downtown Crunch, it brought together residents, business owners and social service agencies to address difficult problems facing downtown Victoria. It also has convened public, private and community agencies to tackle the shortage of affordable housing. Most recently, the Community Council applied its communication and collaboration

experience to the Quality of Life Challenge, a bold strategy seeking new ways to ensure that all residents of the BC Capital Region enjoy a good quality of life.

Still other voluntary sector organizations bring distinctive strengths to the convening role. For example, multifaceted community organizations, such as New Dawn Enterprises in Cape Breton or Community Care in Niagara, have long-standing respect, organizational stability and extensive experience in convening diverse groups to undertake specific projects.

c. Leadership and Advocacy

The voluntary sector also provides ethical leadership. It can take a long-term view – a perspective extending beyond time-limited political horizons. Voluntary organizations can articulate a vision of society; they can work towards a vision of an 'ideal world' without fear of lost votes or campaign dollars.

The voluntary sector can urge governments to move beyond immediate political agendas and can present a holistic view that reflects the needs of all citizens. It gives a voice to interest groups – such as people living in poverty, persons with disabilities or immigrants and refugees – often overlooked in public discourse, even though they occupy a central place in a pluralist democracy. Vibrant Communities helps create this space by ensuring that low-income residents are represented in local governance structures.

d. Providing Technical Assistance

Voluntary organizations are vital repositories of knowledge and expertise that can act as a resource for other citizens or organizations in their efforts to meet needs or contribute to community well-being. These organizations also can provide specialized technical assistance that ranges from helping community groups prepare a funding proposal, enabling the development of new business enterprises and advising on the establishment of housing co-operatives.

e. Research and Education

Nonprofit organizations play a critical role in researching issues of local concern and raising awareness about their causes and possible solutions. In their search for solutions to poverty, organizations in Waterloo, Niagara and Calgary have undertaken research on the concept and

practice of 'living wage,' earlier described**,** and how it can be achieved on a consistent basis in these communities.

While sound research is a necessary step in the process of finding practicable solutions, equally important is the ability to communicate the results in a way that engages community support. Social marketing and community learning processes are two approaches these organizations are using as they attempt to involve the community in efforts to reduce poverty.

Putting It All Together

It is clear that each sector can make an important and unique contribution to reducing poverty. Together, the sectors act as community intermediaries that serve as meeting places for local stakeholders, enabling them to examine the diverse and interdependent interventions that will help reduce poverty in their communities.

There are many benefits of bringing together a range of actors in these kinds of collaborative initiatives. The primary strength lies the fact that no single party can achieve the same objectives of a project on its own. The collaboration draws upon the unique areas of knowledge, skill, expertise and networks that each sector represents. Collaborative arrangements can help break down bureaucratic barriers and respond quickly to problems and opportunities.

But while it is easy to sing the praises of collaboration and partnership, it is often difficult to acknowledge its challenges. Partnership is hard. It is heavy. It can be exasperating if certain partners over-commit and under-deliver, and even paralyzing if there are conflicting visions of project goals.

There are also serious power imbalances inherent in partnerships – especially those that involve the private sector and nonprofits, or governments and the voluntary sector. Concerns have been raised regarding the inordinate power and control that come with the ability to purchase entry into a field under the guise of partnership. Many nonprofit organizations question their ability to be equal players with business partners, for example, who may wield substantial economic power and political influence.

It would be naïve to pretend that this problem does not exist or to suggest that it easily can be resolved. But it is also clear that the power imbalances inherent in these arrangements can be mitigated to a large extent through an approach which recognizes explicitly the unique contribution of each sector.

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