



# **Community Renewal**

*by*

**Sherri Torjman**

**December 2003**

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## ***Background***

This paper explores the rebuilding and renewal of communities – the economic and social heartbeat of the nation. It is one of a series of papers written in support of Vibrant Communities, a four-year national effort to explore promising local solutions to reduce poverty. The project is sponsored by the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. Human Resources Development Canada is funding the policy component of the work.

The Vibrant Communities initiatives throughout Canada are linked together through an active learning strategy. Selected conveners from 14 cities are involved in a Pan-Canadian Learning Community in which they meet monthly to share ideas, resources and strategies, and to plan their collective work. (One more site is expected to join in the next few months.) The communities seek to improve the effectiveness of their individual efforts through this strategic collaborative approach.

In addition, several communities 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 both a community-wide vision and 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.

The specific goal of the Vibrant Communities projects is to reduce poverty. But they are also concerned more broadly with improving the quality of life in their respective regions. In some cases, they seek to revitalize neighbourhoods that have lost their traditional economic base or that are experiencing grim social problems, such as a serious lack of affordable housing. This paper explores the importance of these community renewal efforts and the role that governments can play in support of such renewal.

## ***The Context***

All communities seek, either explicitly or implicitly, to attain a high quality of life for their citizens. But few communities actually can claim that they are close to achieving this goal. Far too many regions in Canada grapple with high rates of unemployment and poverty. Many neighbourhoods face additional stresses related to problems of marginalization – e.g., Aboriginal Canadians living in urban areas, skilled immigrants who are unemployed or underemployed, and persons with disabilities unable to find accessible housing or paid work.

Major urban areas, in particular, are struggling to cope with a wide range of stresses related to complex social problems, such as tenuous accommodation, homelessness, drug abuse and domes-

tic violence. These social pressures have been exacerbated over the past decade by funding cuts in such areas as social housing, Employment Insurance, social services and welfare. Moreover, local governments throughout the country face difficult demands like the growing need for home care, linked to an aging population. The property tax base is too limited and regressive to address effectively the broad scope of social, economic and environmental challenges that many communities now face.

In addition to tackling negative stresses, major urban centres face positive pressures. In the context of globalization, they need to become world-class players on the global stage in the search for knowledge workers. Urban areas must address new demands arising from the need to attract investment and the best possible talent in the world. In order to draw the talent they require to compete economically, they must improve their 'quality of place' [Florida 2000]. Municipalities must pay far more attention to social and environmental factors than they might have in the past. They are viable as urban regions only to the extent that they have – and are seen to have – a good quality of life.

There is growing recognition, both within and outside government, that the economic, social and environmental challenges confronting both communities and nations are becoming increasingly complex. This complexity is rooted in many factors including the globalization of economies, the impact of rapidly changing technologies, the polarization of wages and working time, social exclusion and population aging – to name just a few.

There is also greater awareness that the traditional methods of dealing with issues – single government programs to tackle identified problems – are ineffective and inappropriate. The methods are ineffective because they do not take into account or focus upon the myriad factors that contribute to a given concern. The solutions are inappropriate because they assume that governments alone can solve problems without appreciating or harnessing the substantive contributions that can be made by other sectors, including business and voluntary organizations. The responses rarely seek the input of citizens in helping to resolve local issues. The complexity of the issues and the limitations of traditional interventions have given rise to a new approach to addressing community problems, known as 'comprehensive community initiatives' [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003a].

Comprehensive community initiatives draw upon the accumulating evidence that services meant to improve the life prospects of the poor often prove unsuccessful – at least in part because they are so fragmented. These initiatives also recognize the growing body of research that points to the role which community conditions, sometimes called 'neighbourhood effects,' can play in perpetuating or reducing poverty.

The goals of these local efforts go well beyond the remediation of particular problems, such as teenage pregnancy or low income. Comprehensive community initiatives attempt instead to foster a fundamental transformation of poor neighbourhoods and regions. These efforts seek to

catalyze a process of sustained improvement in the circumstances and opportunities of individuals and families in those neighbourhoods and regions.

Comprehensive community initiatives are broad in scope and address a range of issues rather than a single concern. They typically select an overarching theme or population as their focus. They then determine, in collaboration with key players in the community, the wide set of interconnected projects and possible actions that fall within that overall domain.

In addition, comprehensive community initiatives intervene at several levels. At the household level, they try to create opportunities for individuals and families that will improve their lives in different ways. Various projects may be undertaken to ensure access to nutritious food, provide training that helps lead to decent employment or promote access to high-quality, affordable child care.

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

Comprehensive community initiatives are also concerned with fostering a neighbourhood or community's capacity to address its own issues – such as reducing high rates of child abuse, crime, unemployment or urban sprawl. They attempt to build this problem-solving capacity by creating or sustaining networks that serve as a base for making local decisions. In this sense, they are an important means of citizen engagement.

Finally, comprehensive community initiatives seek changes to the broader social and economic context. They recognize that local efforts can go only so far in terms of what they can achieve. Policy changes also are required to make a substantial dent in such areas as homelessness, poverty or environmental restoration.

### ***Why Focus on Communities?***

There is growing evidence from a wide body of literature that communities matter. They matter in terms of their meaning to Canadians who experience first-hand and on a daily basis the quality of their neighbourhood or region – in the form of clean air, safe streets, green space and playgrounds, and other amenities.

But communities also matter in terms of the health of the nation. On the economic front, there is growing recognition that communities are the engines of national economies. A national economy is effectively the sum total of its regional economic activity. Moreover, local communities foster the learning and networking which give rise to innovation.

Innovation often is defined as the creation or generation of new ideas, products or processes. But this conceptualization is too narrow. While innovation *can* entail the creation of new ideas, it also involves the application of existing ideas in unique ways or to new fields. Innovation basically means the introduction into the economy or society of new knowledge or novel combinations of old knowledge [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003b].

While a ‘big’ concept, innovation actually thrives in regions and more specifically in communities through strategic groupings known as clusters. These consist of interrelated, geographically concentrated producers or service providers along with their key suppliers and supporting knowledge, research and government institutions.

Innovative capabilities are best sustained through regions that share a common knowledge base. The regional level is critical because the factors of space and proximity contribute to the knowledge and capacity for learning that support innovation. Innovation therefore should be understood as a process rooted in local regions.

Many smaller communities in rural and remote regions have significant knowledge and entrepreneurial resources. They may lack the networks, infrastructure, investment capital or shared knowledge to live up to their innovative potential. But they have the crucial assets for innovation – people, knowledge and the ability to learn. In fact, virtually every community, region and nation has the actual and potential assets to succeed in the knowledge economy: its people. But success requires investment in their development – in their basic and ongoing need for learning, an intensely local process.

Communities provide not only the basis for learning, which is the gateway to economic success; they also serve as the foundation for social development. Emerging Canadian research on child development points to social factors embedded in the quality of family and community life as the most significant determinants of child development [Willms 2002].

Family-enabling environments are required in order to provide much-needed support for parents and children, ensure positive and nurturing experiences to children and help parents cope with the stresses of raising children. The healthy development of children depends in large part on the social context in which they grow up. Neighbourhoods with high levels of social capital – relationships, networks and associations – tend to be good places to raise children [Putnam 2000: 307]. Individuals who live in communities and societies with strong social capital tend to be more prosperous, healthier and experience less crime [Helliwell 2001: 6].

Public health researchers at Harvard University have clearly established that social connectedness is one of the most powerful determinants of well-being. Although the evidence does not point to definitive conclusions as to why social capital matters for health, there are several plausible theories. Social networks furnish tangible assistance, such as money, convalescent care and transportation, which reduces psychological and physical stress, and provides a safety net. Social networks also tend to reinforce healthy norms; socially isolated people are more likely to smoke, drink, overeat and engage in other health-damaging behaviours [Putnam 2000: 327]. Through the network of bonds and trust that it creates, social capital contributes to social cohesion and to the general health of neighbourhoods [Putnam 2000: 309].

Social capital is important for its links not only to health and social cohesion. It also has an impact upon financial health. Social networks can provide job seekers with advice, employment leads, strategic information and letters of recommendation [Putnam 2000: 319]. People who grow up in well-to-do families with economically valuable social ties are more likely to succeed financially, not merely because they tend to be richer and better educated but also because they build on their connections. Residents of extreme poverty areas have fewer ties and have ties of less social worth as measured by the positions of partners, siblings and friends [Putnam 2000: 321].

### ***Basic Principles***

It is of interest that so many different sources of evidence point to a similar conclusion: Healthy communities are vital to the economic and social well-being of individuals and to the nation. But the fact that communities are central to economic and social well-being does not mean that they can or should sustain their health entirely on their own.

Governments also matter – perhaps more than ever. National governments, in particular, play a pivotal role in a global world. They are the interface between the nation and the international bodies making decisions that increasingly affect choices at home. International agreements to which nations are signatory establish the framework for environmental, economic and social policy which, in turn, affects every community.

While the role of national governments has become more important vis-à-vis the global stage, they also can enable community renewal. Before considering the enabling role of government, it is first important to articulate the basic guiding principles to ensure respect for community process.

The Vibrant Communities project in particular and community initiatives, more generally, are *community driven*. This means that citizens play the primary role in identifying the nature of the concerns, prioritizing issues and determining the interventions they deem appropriate for tackling

these concerns. An approach shaped by the community tends to be distinct from government practice, which typically sets out clearly defined parameters for the goals and objectives of any given project, the activities deemed acceptable and the associated time frame for their achievement.

*Government as partner* is another guiding principle. Comprehensive community initiatives encourage partnering and collaborative work. They recognize the value of contributions from diverse backgrounds, networks and areas of expertise. Collaborative relationships create value by bringing new resources, insights and expertise to the table.

But governments often find it difficult to act as partner, especially when they are involved in a funding relationship with a community group. In fact, some would argue that the assumption of an equality relationship is impossible, given the obvious power imbalance. Moreover, public servants may not feel comfortable as partner. They usually are assigned a monitoring and audit function – checking reports, receipts, invoices and other identified ‘deliverables.’ They often do not have permission to contribute to local community processes from the perspective of substantive knowledge or expertise. They need to be encouraged, and indeed rewarded, by the system to act in this capacity.

Another underlying principle of comprehensive community initiatives is that they are asset-based – i.e., they *seek out the assets and resources* embedded in communities. These approaches tend not to view a community from the lens of its weaknesses. Rather, they affirm its strengths and build on these assets to expand local capacity and opportunities. Moreover, comprehensive community initiatives help low-income households, in particular, build their own assets so that they can make choices about their future.

*Inclusion* is another key principle. Comprehensive community initiatives seek to be comprehensive not just from the perspective of the issues they address. They also try to be inclusive in terms of the members they involve. They attempt to engage diverse sectors as well as groups, such as people living in poverty, youth, Aboriginal Canadians and members of racial minorities.

Finally, comprehensive community initiatives recognize the importance of both *outcomes and process*. Outcome indicators include, for example, an increase in the availability of shelter spaces or permanent affordable housing units, or in the numbers of persons who found paid employment or moved out of poverty. Process indicators, by contrast, attempt to capture the shifts that may have occurred in the community as a result of a given effort. These include, for example, the creation of new partnerships between and among organizations that had not worked together in the past, the secondment of staff and other resources to the initiative, or a review by local government or private business of their respective policies and practices.

On the one hand, local efforts must have a clear sense of what they seek to achieve. They must set transparent goals, carefully track their work and try to the best of their ability to reach designated targets. In fact, there must be a concerted effort to ensure that comprehensive community

initiatives work far more strategically to attain concrete measurable outcomes. Unless they are able to do this, they will lose the confidence of funders and other community members investing time and resources in these efforts.

But the process by which these goals are reached is also important. This dual focus is different from typical government practice that focuses primarily upon outcomes. The problem-solving process is not necessarily results-oriented in the short term; it is concerned more with identifying and convening key players. It therefore does not typically meet government criteria – which generally are short-term (funds are granted over the course of a given fiscal year with the work to be completed by the end of that year) and results-based with expectations for almost immediate, quantifiable outcomes. Moreover, governments often set impossibly tight time frames for the completion of the work, given the complexity of the issues. Comprehensive community initiatives recognize the need for *longer time horizons for tackling complex problems*.

### ***The Government Role***

While this paper focuses upon the federal role in particular, governments generally speaking play three key roles around any given issue. Governments act as leaders, investors and enablers with respect to any identified area of concern.

As *leader*, the federal government sets the moral, legal and fiscal context for the country. It determines national values through the international covenants to which it is signatory. It is responsible for the Constitutional framework, which spells out the division of powers in the country. National fiscal and monetary policy establishes the economic framework for local regions. Priorities for the country are identified in a Throne Speech, which opens a new Parliamentary session, and in federal Budgets.

Governments also can act as leaders by modelling desirable behaviour. They consciously can assume, for instance, the role of exemplary employer in relation to hiring practices, decent wages, adequate benefits and reasonable working hours. As employers, governments can show greater consideration for family time – which they trumpet as crucial but which they rarely respect. Governments can provide internships for young people, make a special effort to accommodate persons with disabilities and ensure a diverse and inclusive workforce. In short, governments as employers can set the pace for all employers throughout the country.

In addition to exemplary social behaviour, governments can have a major environmental impact by cleaning up their own operations and encouraging similar practices by their suppliers. They can pursue green procurement by purchasing goods and services only from businesses that are environmentally sound.

Through their powers of regulation and ability to influence behaviour by means of incentives and modelling, governments are effectively the instrument for achieving collective goals. They provide as well as enable the provision of public goods that benefit all citizens.

But governments do more than ‘create the box.’ They also determine what is ‘in the box’ through strategic *investment* – in citizens, social infrastructure and community capacity.

Governments can invest in individuals through support for skill development, direct transfers of cash and indirect assistance through reduction of taxes. Major direct investments include the National Child Benefit, which provides cash payments to the majority of Canadian families with children. Ottawa pays benefits to seniors through Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement. It administers the Canada Pension Plan in respect of long-term interruptions of work resulting from retirement or severe disability. Over the past few years, Ottawa has begun to make small but important investments in social housing. It shares with provinces in the cost of health care services and delivers health care directly to Aboriginal Canadians living on reserve.

In addition to direct assistance to individuals, the primary responsibility for financing and overseeing the construction of vital social infrastructure resides with governments. Key elements of social infrastructure include affordable housing, early childhood development and recreation. These substantive areas of public investment are essential for reducing poverty and promoting economic and social well-being, more generally.

But while governments as the agent of society must remain the prime actor in the financing and design of social infrastructure, they cannot build all its components on their own. As it did in the past with medicare, postsecondary education, welfare and social services, the federal government in particular must create this ‘social commons’ in partnership with other levels of government, voluntary organizations, the private sector, parents and community members, municipalities, employers, trade unions, schools and service providers.

It is around the support of these collaborative efforts that the enabling role of government becomes particularly important – by helping communities pool the resources and expertise they need to address complex issues. Building the capacity of communities to tackle economic and social challenges should never be seen as a replacement for a strong public core of supports and social infrastructure. Rather, it is a complement – an additional component that adds immeasurably – to that solid core.

## ***The Enabling Role***

The enabling role of governments is an important strategic function that seeks to bolster the capacity of communities to meet their economic, social and environmental objectives. The process involves rethinking the use of community resources and building relationships among these resources for mutually beneficial problem-solving.

### ***a. Convening***

As a first step, governments as enablers can support the local convening role. An essential early step in any community process is to build relationships with relevant sectors and organizational partners. These collaborative efforts do not happen simply on their own. They require a coordinating or governance mechanism to bring and hold together the diverse players.

Some community-based or regional efforts, for example, are governed by a coordinating mechanism in the form of a leadership roundtable or steering committee, which is generally multisectoral in composition. It acts as champion of the issue, convenes key players, helps set a clear vision for the effort and associated strategic plan, and acts as liaison between the broader community and the designated initiative. A set of indicators and measures also are required to determine if the action being taken is appropriate in terms of both direction and time.

Governments can do more than just grant financial support for a local convening process. Representatives from government departments and agencies can participate as active partners in the process. They also can provide information as to research and projects under way in other parts of the country or throughout the world to help guide the local effort.

### ***b. Technical Assistance***

Communities that seek to tackle complex economic, social and environmental problems often require assistance in addressing these difficult areas. Governments are in a unique position to provide support for this technical assistance (also referred to in the literature as ‘coaching’). Rather than carrying out the work themselves, they can support the capacity of communities to undertake the identified tasks.

Communities may need guidance, for example, around disposing waste appropriately, constructing a nonprofit housing complex, operating a housing co-op, teaching entrepreneurial skills or

setting up a community loan fund. The establishment and operation of these activities usually build upon years of experience and expertise; they may require navigation through reams of bureaucracy and paperwork. Technical assistance refers to the critical guidance that enables communities to carry out their identified goals both effectively and efficiently.

Regardless of the particular area of interest, technical assistance supports both generic skills and specific skills.

Generic skills refer to the areas of knowledge and expertise that all communities need regardless of focus. These generic skills pertain to the processes involved in local decision-making: involving partners from diverse sectors, engaging marginalized groups, developing strategic plans, raising funds, creating learning networks, and devising evaluation plans and monitoring systems for the identified work.

Technical assistance in specific areas focuses upon key ‘technologies’ related to selected substantive areas, such as creating affordable housing, setting up licensed child care, financing a community loan fund and organizing a home care co-operative. Designated skills are essential for communities to achieve their identified goals and obtain the desired results from their work.

There are several ways to deliver technical assistance – whether for generic or specific purposes. They include group learning, customized coaching, preparing resource materials and troubleshooting. A large-scale national project likely will need to employ a combination of methodologies in order to meet the capacity-building requirements of participating communities while staying within budgetary guidelines.

One possibility is to hold coaching sessions on a particular subject on a national, regional or provincial/territorial basis. Participants would engage in an active learning process – say around developing local strategic plans, evaluating comprehensive community initiatives or establishing community businesses.

Another more traditional method of delivering technical assistance entails a customized approach in which coaches travel to a given community and work intensively with key organizers and a broader group around an identified challenge. The focus could be a generic skill, such as local fundraising, or a specific skill such as establishing a housing co-operative. While this route is costly and time-consuming, it is usually effective because it is tailored to local needs.

A supplementary form of technical assistance involves the preparation of learning tools and resources that can be obtained in hard copy and online for communities to use on an ongoing basis. While these learning tools can never replace personal coaching, they are helpful guides that communities can employ as required.

Finally, a set of coaches can be available on call as ‘troubleshooters’ to help communities requesting assistance with difficult circumstances that emerge in the course of their work. The challenge may be rooted in personal problems – for instance, the project coordinator has quit or members of the governance structure are at serious odds with each other over the proposed direction of the local effort. Problems also may arise from contextual factors – e.g., a major industry in the community closes down unexpectedly and hundreds of residents are slated to lose their jobs.

It should be noted that these various forms of technical assistance are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that several communities across the country likely will identify a similar need. They may require guidance, for example, in order to create transitional shelters for youth at risk of becoming homeless. These selected communities could be brought together for a session that addresses their specific area of interest. In fact, technical assistance, regardless of its format, effectively can be understood as a form of customized training to enhance learning and promote the acquisition of new skills.

### *c. Learning*

While governments at all levels recognize the value of learning, they usually express this interest by investing in traditional educational institutions. While these investments are essential, they are not sufficient. Governments should *support learning both within and between communities*. The value of this investment derives from the fact that communities can learn from each others’ experiences and can raise the bar of practice to increasingly higher levels rather than starting over in every case at square one.

But learning does not simply emerge spontaneously in communities. The process must be carefully developed and strategically pursued. Communities need support in respect of these goals and governments, in particular, are uniquely poised to enable this enabling role. The Office for Learning Technologies (OLT) housed in the Department of Human Resources Development Canada provides one example of current practice.

The OLT was created in 1996 to promote the effective use of learning technologies; support the assessment, research and testing related to the use of learning technologies; and increase the availability and sharing of knowledge and quality information about learning technologies. In recent years, it has provided support specifically for ‘community learning networks.’ While these networks vary across the country, they are the same in many respects.

Community learning networks are locally controlled structures that support community development and aspire to enhance the lives of their members through lifelong learning. They seek to reduce disparities among citizens by encouraging broad participation and inclusion. Many com-

munity learning networks help members use various forms of technology, such as educational networking, distance learning and tele-learning, to promote learning for work skills and learning for life.

The governance mechanisms that currently steer the wide range of community learning networks vary widely. In Nanaimo, British Columbia, for example, there are members from all educational and learning institutes in the region as well as the federal and provincial governments. The Random North Development Corporation in Newfoundland is concerned with sustainable community economic development. Its governance mechanism includes representation from the Economic Zone Board, rural development associations, the College of the North Atlantic, Human Resources Development Canada and the provincial departments of Industry, Trade and Rural Development, and Human Resources and Employment.

Despite the differences of these local governance mechanisms for learning, some common principles apply across the board. First, these coordinating mechanisms are multi-organizational. Most are multisectoral. They seek to involve representatives from education and training, government, the voluntary sector and business. The governance mechanism convenes key players, sets out a strategic plan for the community learning effort and acts as the liaison between the broader community and the learning initiative. While many players are engaged in the overall governance, one organization usually acts as champion for the effort and the diverse learning activities upon which the community decides to embark.

The challenge for communities is to identify their learning priorities from among a wide range of possible options. The equally pressing challenge for governments – and for the OLT in particular – is to figure out how best to support and enhance these choices. The government support effectively helps communities recognize and harness their unique assets. The federal government provides funding for the convening and strategic planning functions which enable community members themselves to come to the table, identify the range of possible options and then implement the actual plan.

In addition to promoting learning within communities, it is important to encourage learning across communities. As noted, Vibrant Communities convenes a 14-member Pan-Canadian Learning Partnership on a monthly basis to provide updates about their respective interventions and to share lessons.

Vibrant Communities also has organized several tele-learning forums in which representatives from the governance structures in the 14 participating communities and other interested parties join together in a teleconference with a resource person specializing in a common area of interest (e.g., local fundraising). Up to 200 people at a time have participated in these tele-learning forums. After the presentation by the resource person, each community holds its own learning session to discuss the highlights and to consider the application of the material to its unique circumstances.

Governments at all levels are at the heart of the knowledge-based world. They collect, store and analyze information (sometimes it seems like that is all they do). Information is crucial not only for understanding the current context. It is also essential for tracking trends and determining whether progress has been achieved over time – all part of the pervasive accountability agenda.

The focus in recent years upon government employees as managers of projects or of selected ‘files’ tends to diminish the importance of substantive knowledge. Yet government employees have expertise in many areas, including the collection and management of information. This knowledge can be especially valuable to communities that wish to produce a local inventory of assets and skills or to conduct a survey of existing and prospective employment opportunities.

National labour market surveys, for example, cannot be readily disaggregated to individual communities. But the federal government, in particular, can provide guidance and expertise to help communities determine their labour market trends and emerging skill needs. Human Resources Development Canada also has supported research in selected communities involving the detailed mapping of children’s needs; the community ‘maps’ then were used to identify the most appropriate neighbourhoods for interventions focused upon the early years. The federal government could extend this expertise to other neighbourhoods interested in the process.

A second stream of research should focus upon *substantive policy areas linked to community renewal*. These involve traditional areas such as income security, early childhood development including high-quality child care, decent affordable housing, skills training, community economic development and environmental clean-up or restoration. This work also should explore barriers that may be embedded in housing or welfare policies which make it difficult to build affordable housing or help the unemployed find paid work.

The federal government need not support or undertake new research, however, if substantial efforts already are under way in a given area. Its role in this case would be to identify relevant areas of research and to ensure that the evidence is made widely available across the country. The practice implications of various research findings are also important to examine. The work of the BC Homelessness Research Network is one example in which this applied dissemination role would be helpful.

This second stream also involves less traditional areas of research worth exploring in terms of family and neighbourhood resilience. These areas include, for instance, the role of arts and recreation in building strong neighbourhoods and the social impact upon communities of environmental revitalization – e.g., brownfields recovery, greening of the neighbourhood or upgrading of homes and buildings for energy efficiency.

The emerging research on recreation, for instance, is pointing to its pivotal role in assisting ‘at risk’ children and youth, supporting vulnerable families and creating opportunities for social

capital development. The environmental dimension is a particularly effective way to engage young people in making positive contributions to the community. There also may be small business opportunities that arise out of environmental work in the areas of recycling, waste disposal, assessment of energy efficiencies and facility upgrading.

The third stream of research involves the *identification of exemplary practices* both within and outside Canada. It is important to document and share these relevant practices. There are thousands of community projects that potentially could be profiled. It is essential to be selective so as not to overwhelm communities with too much information – which then can become debilitating as opposed to enabling. One relevant model, for instance, involves work in Saskatoon in which a group that sets up housing co-operatives also teaches skills in home maintenance and upgrading. The housing is serving the traditional function of providing a decent home and a non-traditional function as a base for skills development.

But there is more to this search than a scan of local models. It is important to explore the work and lessons of other countries, including the US and the UK, engaged in supporting neighbourhood revitalization through various forms of comprehensive community initiatives.

Another major area of research and policy work involves the *development of a statistical database* related to key areas such as poverty, affordable housing and homelessness. While data in each of these areas is already available, there could be a linking of information as well as a breakdown by province and territory. Unique community profiles also could be prepared. As noted, much of the existing national data cannot be disaggregated in its current form to local or regional levels.

In addition to good information and research, community work can succeed only to the extent that it operates within a supportive policy context. *The policy dimensions of community work often are overlooked even though they have a profoundly important impact upon the ability of communities to find effective solutions to the issues they are addressing.*

There are several components to effective policy work. One vital dimension involves the exploration of policies that are supportive of local solutions to community renewal. This research may pertain to community building generally (e.g., financing arrangements or monitoring and assessment of outcomes) or to selected substantive policy areas (e.g., income security, child care, housing, training, asset building or crime prevention through social development).

A related component of supportive policy work involves the identification of barriers embedded in government procedure and practices that impede effective community interventions. Substantive policy barriers include income security programs that require applicants to declare themselves completely unemployable or that cut eligibility for health- and disability-related benefits if recipients move off social assistance. Procedural barriers include, for example, short-term funding, unrealistic time expectations for producing results and a narrow focus upon measurable out-

comes only.

Finally, good policy work is effected not only through strong research and analysis. It also involves key stakeholders in *discussions of possible policy approaches and solutions*.

In Vibrant Communities, for example, monthly policy dialogues are held with representatives from ten federal government departments and representatives from Vibrant Communities projects in Halifax, Saskatoon, Calgary, Edmonton and Victoria. Federal departments and agencies that participate in these discussions include Human Resources Development, Health, Heritage, Justice, Status of Women, Industry Canada, Citizenship and Immigration, Privy Council Office, Indian and Northern Affairs, and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Recent conversations have included representatives from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and from the BC Department of Human Resources.

Another dimension of the enabling function is to help communities understand the policy process. In recent months, some communities have been asking for more guidance with respect to working at the policy level and creating collaborative approaches to joint problem-solving with governments around selected policy issues. The Vibrant Communities project is developing a tele-learning forum on this issue.

#### *e. Coordination*

Finally, pan-Canadian efforts that involve work at both national and community levels require strong *coordination*, possibly through some form of secretariat housed within the federal government. This coordinating mechanism could take responsibility for both the national and community components of the work, making the links between these two streams.

At the national level, a secretariat could coordinate the technical assistance, and research and policy development dimensions of any community renewal effort. It also would ensure that the various components of the initiative complement each other. For example, research findings on approaches to affordable housing would be incorporated as part of any coaching under way on this issue. Conversely, technical assistance on local surveys could influence the development of community profiles under the research dimension of the work. In short, the coordination function helps promote coherence within the national effort.

But there is another basis for coherence – and that is with other initiatives currently being undertaken by several federal departments and agencies. For example, the secretariat could provide updates to communities regarding policy measures in such areas as housing or income security changes. A central coordinating body also could act as the liaison with other countries engaged in

comparable work.

A national secretariat could convene discussions involving related federal initiatives to ensure that these are working together effectively. It could track the efforts of various departments currently sponsoring comprehensive community initiatives, including the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (on homelessness), the National Crime Prevention Centre within Justice Canada (crime prevention through social development) and the Urban Aboriginal Strategy being coordinated by the Privy Council Office.

In a recent policy dialogue convened by Vibrant Communities, it was noted that several neighbourhoods were receiving federal funds for comprehensive community initiatives for similar purposes. While the departments themselves were not aware of this duplicate funding, it was recognized that the multiple interventions actually can strain the capacity of some communities to handle the varied demands – particularly when many of the same people and organizations are involved in these efforts.

Another issue raised in a recent policy dialogue was the fact that the federal government could be acting far more strategically in terms of the methods it employs to gather information and ‘intelligence’ about communities. Departments should be pooling their information and resources to develop profiles of the communities with which they will be working in such areas as demography, employment, income levels, housing vacancies and key organizations. The federal government also needs a coherent way to find out about existing initiatives to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the community – both renewing the community and contributing immeasurably to its quality of life.

## *Conclusion*

There is substantial work already under way throughout the country which is seeking to strengthen and re-energize communities – whether in major urban centres or small towns in rural or remote areas of the country. But while the focus is community, the actors are not just local players. Governments at all levels have a strategic role in helping to renew communities. The role derives not just from direct investment but, equally importantly, from support for the capacity of communities to carry out their work.

Thoughtful leadership, careful investing and the enabling of local capacity are major government roles. This paper focuses specifically upon the enabling role in community renewal, which does not necessarily mean more government – but clearly means more strategic and more intelligent government.

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