

INTRODUCTION

Good things start with a conversation. So do good communities.

Communities that work are places where people from different walks of life come together to discuss ideas that matter to them. Over time (sometimes long periods of time), trust and understanding emerge and individuals agree to work together. They discuss ideas and eventually develop plans to act. Once the foundation for action is set, people engage deeply and work together relentlessly to realize the dreams they share.

In what we call Vibrant Communities, these types of conversations happen frequently.

CONTEXT AND INSPIRATION

I am often cited as the founder of the Vibrant Communities movement, but in truth the movement found me. It is an idea that has radically changed me.

The idea emerged in 2001, when a founding group met over a period of six months to reflect on the experience of Opportunities 2000, a Millennium campaign that I initiated with Mark Cabaj and a team of volunteers and staff in Waterloo, Ontario, to reduce poverty in the Region of Waterloo to the lowest level in Canada. For more than a decade prior to that, I had worked with an amazing team to build a local economic development organization called the Community Opportunities Development Association. We helped over five thousand low-income people find work and twelve hundred more start small businesses.

Even though we were one of the most successful organizations of our type in the country, poverty continued to rise in our community. Opportunities 2000 was designed to correct this.

Rather than developing more programs, we decided to run a four-year Millennium campaign to mobilize the entire community to focus on poverty reduction. The goal was to initiate a collaborative process that would ask business, the voluntary sector, government, and people who had experienced poverty first-hand to form a partnership and a representative leadership roundtable, develop a community plan for poverty-reduction, and then work together to implement the plan.

The result was remarkable. Not only did we impact seventeen hundred families in our community, we also created a new way of working together to effect community change. Opportunities 2000 was recognized with national and international awards.

The members of the Vibrant Communities founding group who reflected on the Opportunities 2000 experience never actually met face to face, though we all knew each other very well. I call it a group simply because that was what I considered them as I shuttled between them over a six-month period, going from one visit to the next and passing on the ideas of one to the other. It was a brilliant “meeting” that continued, at least for me, seemingly without pause. A conversation with one person would lead to a conversation with another, and it all flowed along as if we were together.

In this group was Alan Broadbent, of the Avana Capital Corporation and the Maytree Foundation, who had inspired me to co-found with him, in 2001, the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement.

Alan has a brilliant mind and is intensely passionate about cities. As a whole-systems thinker, he has an uncanny way of seeing everything in 3-D. His probing questions deepened my understanding of the value of our work in Waterloo and teased out potential applications for this work in a broader context.

Alan was particularly interested in our multi-sector work that brought together people from the private sector, government, the voluntary sector, and those affected by poverty to create a jointly owned community campaign. He believed that the power of government to effect change in cities was diminishing. He saw the importance, therefore, of an increase in citizen action and collaborative approaches, and compelled me to consider how we might help communities to harness this new power.

Alan co-founded and chairs Tamarack and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. The Maytree Foundation, which he founded with Judy Broadbent, invests significant financial resources to fund the capacity of Tamarack and Caledon to provide leadership in Vibrant Communities.

Two other members of the founding group were Tim Brodhead, President and CEO of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, and Katharine Pearson, who led many innovative learning approaches for McConnell. Tim brings a profound wisdom and insight to his work. His boyish optimism is tempered by the realism of one who has fought and “almost won” far too many battles for good. Katharine contributed to the team her unique ability to bring diverse people and ideas into unison, along with ever-encouraging words, absolute patience, and a warm smile.

Together, Tim, Katharine, and the team at McConnell had been working on an idea that they called “applied dissemination,” which focused on helping projects and organizations that were successful in one city to grow into national initiatives. The team sought to understand how such growth might occur and was willing to fund a couple of experiments. The McConnell Family Foundation was a key Opportunities 2000 donor, and Tim and Katharine felt that the campaign could be tested in other cities. The foundation’s board provided more than \$2 million to launch Vibrant Communities and Tim and Katharine have been active in the work ever since. (We were deeply saddened when Katherine died, in May 2008. She will be sorely missed, both personally and professionally.) Without the support of the McConnell Foundation, our work would not have been possible. In addition to giving us funds to help launch Vibrant Communities, the foundation’s board contributed \$5 million to help us grow.

Frances Westley was also a member of the the Vibrant Communities founding group. At the time, she was based at McGill University, where she led the McGill-McConnell program to advance the leadership capacity of national voluntary-sector organizations. Frances has a remarkable gift of turning confusion into action and sorting out understandable and actionable patterns from the ideas, feelings, and intents of individuals and groups. She had endless time for me as I met with the founding groups. She helped me identify not only the ideas that would shape Vibrant Communities, but also the feelings of inadequacy and fear that I was experiencing.

The final person in the founding group, and the one who would prove the most influential in shaping the ideas behind Vibrant Communities, was Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Sherri has been on the front lines of policy development in Canada for many years. She is one of the kindest, most generous people you could ever hope to meet. She cares deeply about the disadvantaged in our

society and the issues that face them. She uses her sharp mind and remarkable writing skills to express with great clarity what needs to be done to create a caring and sustainable future in this country.

Sherri wrote a number of policy and reflection papers for Opportunities 2000. She lent credibility to the campaign, not only through her knowledge and persuasive writing, but also through her national reputation as one of Canada's leading social policy thinkers. It was her contribution that, in no small part, made Opportunities 2000 an initiative of national interest from its very inception.

When I first spoke to Sherri about the possibility of forming Vibrant Communities Canada, she was working on a formative monograph with partners from the Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations, the Canadian Council on Social Development, and the United Way of Canada - Centraide Canada to establish key policy priorities that each organization could promote. Published as *Reclaiming Our Humanity*, it shaped the ideas that would become Vibrant Communities, grounding the ideas in a social policy context and making them the essential building blocks of our work.

There were, of course, other conversations during this time. In fact, there are many other people who may be considered co-founders of Vibrant Communities, including Mark Cabaj, Louise Kearney, and Eric Leviten-Reid. As the leading staff in the project, their sharp thinking and ability to test and explore ideas in building the Vibrant Communities Network have been critical to our success.

Anne Kubisch provided immeasurable understanding and a language for our work at the Aspen Roundtable on Community Change. Senator Landon Pearson, our honorary chair, inspired us with her campaign to save the children of this world. These two contributed to our development in those early days and, in turn, helped us to create and found Vibrant Communities.

But it was in Sherri's work that we found the inspiration for our national initiative. It was when about fifty people from fourteen cities met in April 2002 agreeing to work together to reduce poverty across Canada, that we decided to name ourselves Vibrant Communities, a concept inspired by Sherri..

RECLAIMING OUR HUMANITY

Though the words and ideas expressed in *Reclaiming Our Humanity* are Sherri's, the monograph also reflects many of the themes of the conversations within the founding group. There was a synergy of ideas in the public ethos of that time, which Sherri captures beautifully. Rather than restate the ideas expressed in the founding group conversations, I will share a few key quotes from her monograph and describe how the ideas behind them influenced our work.

Vibrant Communities Can Do a Lot

Vibrant communities ensure that basic needs are met. There is no family without a roof over its head. No child goes to school hungry. No person suffers from abuse or violence without having a safe place to go. No family lives as an island without help and support when needed. Everyone has access to clean air and water.

Vibrant communities recognize the wide range of ingredients necessary

for social development. They take steps to harness these resources in new and creative ways. They bring together the players who can effect change.

Early in the work of the VC Network, we recognized that if communities were to significantly reduce poverty, they would need to go beyond starting more employment programs, food banks, and social security schemes. To truly reduce poverty, we would need to engage leaders and citizens in a larger discussion about the kind of community they wanted. The concept of vibrant communities, as Sherri described it, was exactly what we needed to inspire these types of discussion.

Sherri's monograph also provided a clear picture of the conditions to address in creating the kind of communities that we envisioned. Though some might see her vision as bordering on the utopian, those of us who had spent decades on the front lines of social change saw it as an expression of what was necessary if we were ever going to make progress. We were tired of incremental changes that focused on specific solutions. We recognized in Sherri's description of vibrant communities a call to look beyond single-issue solutions to embrace community or system change. Housing, food security, safety, belonging, and a clean environment were best seen as a package, with each element as important as the other.

Sherri also called for communities to think and work differently. They would harness local resources (assets) in new and innovative ways to improve the conditions of their communities. For years, community developers were encouraged to take a deficit view of communities: to identify those things that were not working and fix them. An asset-based approach takes a positive view of communities, asking practitioners to harness the community's talent and resources to facilitate change.

In her description of vibrant communities, Sherri also captured the methodology for implementing the vision. She writes, "Bring together the players who can effect change" This multi-sector approach is at the heart of Vibrant Communities Canada.

Reducing Poverty Is the Crucial First Step

A vision of social development must begin with meeting the needs of the most vulnerable citizens. Being poor means poor food, poor housing and poor health. Its effects are devastating not only for individuals. Nations are at risk when such a large slice of their population is excluded from participating and contributing to the fullest of its ability.

There was never any doubt that the VC Network would focus our work on poverty reduction. However, wanting to go beyond seeing things through an anti-poverty lens, we also used a community-development lens, acknowledging the devastating effect of poverty on individuals and communities. For the founders of Vibrant Communities, reducing poverty was about raising the overall quality of life in a community.

In fact, an oft-repeated phrase in the VC Network is, "We want *less* poor, not *better* poor." The statement challenges much of the anti-poverty work in our communities, work that results in human-services supports that make living more tolerable. We give people food, housing, income-support, and employment training. All of these supports are critical, but no one of them alone is adequate.

The VC approach was developed to consider the conditions that would create a community in which poverty could not exist. Sherri helped us to define the approach when she linked poverty to issues of security and contribution.

Reclaiming Our Humanity recognizes the importance of every citizen living in a community to the community's overall quality of life. Sherri's vision is of all people "participating and contributing to the fullest of (their) ability." The VC Network has embraced this vision and sees it as inherent in all of our work, especially in bringing people who are living in poverty into full participation in the life of their community.

Vibrant Communities Ensure Support, Inclusion, and Learning

This is a vision of vibrant communities. They provide support to all members. They include all members. And they promote opportunities for learning at all ages and stages.

Vibrant communities provide support that meets basic needs. Vibrant communities promote inclusion to enable all members to participate actively in social, economic, cultural and political life. And vibrant communities afford opportunities for the lifelong acquisition of knowledge and skills. In the real world, these dimensions are intrinsically linked. Social development is both rich and multifaceted; any framework or vision must embody this complexity.

Fractured responses result in fractured solutions. The VC Network has embraced the use of a comprehensive lens for developing poverty-reduction initiatives. We recognize that no one solution offered in isolation will suffice: A full range of supports is what is required.

In order to achieve these linked-up solutions, VC members work across sectors and take a whole-systems approach to their planning and work. This is best exemplified in their community plans. Communities try to understand what is happening within their bounds and to work across sectors to network the organizations working on the issues that matter – organizations that will make the biggest difference.

Social Capital Embodies Networks That Enable Collective Action

Social capital is not an end in itself; it is the means to an end. It provides the foundation for human capital development. And it is an essential ingredient in enabling communities to make things happen collectively. It is through the process of bringing people together and forming relations and networks that social, economic and environmental challenges can be most effectively tackled.

Building relationships is at the heart of the Vibrant Communities approach. Connecting people, developing new ideas for community improvement, and then working together to realize these ideas is at the core of the work. The network's multi-sector approach has helped us to realize that the process of identifying solutions is as important as implementing them. The goal is always to include those who have the power to make change happen.

In building social capital by forming social networks and advancing collective

action, Vibrant Communities partners have been able to both implement innovative approaches to poverty reduction and effect local policy decisions. These policy decisions may result in changes to transportation costs and/or access, and to employment policies or planning approaches leading to more refined and specific local approaches. By connecting people, opening new conversations, and building trust and deeper sense of community, Vibrant Communities partners are reducing poverty in significant and sustainable ways.

An Environment for Change

This vision for reclaiming our humanity seeks three ends: First, we seek to ensure that the environment and social well-being are on the table as issues equally important and intrinsic to economic growth. Second, we want to be at the table. We want to be a full partner in discussions and in work undertaken to pursue a social development agenda. Third, we wish to turn the tables to ensure that communities can lead from a position of strength. They must be at the forefront of ensuring support, inclusion and learning.

Vibrant communities stress the importance of influencing government policy and wider community-systems change. Though members of the VC Network are interested in federal and provincial policies to reduce poverty, they recognize that their voice is best heard through changes undertaken at the local level. The network has no specific policy statement for poverty reduction. Instead, it has an approach. The approach begins with the premise that communities must speak from a place of strength on the issues that are facing them. This strength comes from forming a consensus across sectors on what needs to change. Communities can accomplish a lot, even without provincial or federal support. Communities do not need to wait for permission to change policies to help the poor.



Thank you for joining the Vibrant Communities conversation. In sharing our story with you and a broader constituency interested in place-based solutions, as well as with policy makers in Canada and around the world, we hope to deepen the understanding of the importance of this work and to open the door to a mutual conversation about what works. We know, when we employ national or provincial policies to affect poverty, that significant room must be given for place-based approaches to implementing these policy changes. We believe that poverty must be eradicated one community at a time.

When we bring our communities into a new conversation, much can happen. Vibrant Communities is evidence of this.

REFERENCE

Torjman, S. (2001) *Reclaiming Our Humanity*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Dec.

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