

Comprehensive Community Initiatives

What we know so far (Part I)

BY MARK CABAJ

Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs) are efforts by citizens to take on the most complex problems facing their communities and the lives of their fellow residents. We're talking real *dilemmas* here – things like community safety, homelessness, and poverty that cross the conventional boundaries of “social,” “economic,” and “physical,” and don't respond to narrow or short-term action taken by governments, charities, business, or other sectors working in isolation.

Unlike these conventional approaches, the CCI is a deliberate effort to bring to the task diverse people and organizations commanding a range of skills, experience, and insight. Moreover, they explore the inter-related root causes of the dilemma, and make that all-embracing analysis both the rationale and framework for multi-year action. The comprehensive lens applies to both the way they see and the way they do.

A great many communities have undertaken CCIs in the last ten years, particularly to address poverty. Can a comprehensive, community-driven approach get the job done? What hampers its effectiveness?

It's too early to offer definitive answers to these questions. But the experience of the Vibrant Communities initiative to reduce poverty (see sidebar, next page) sheds some light on them, as does research by the Aspen Institute.* So we can make a start.

Many issues affect the success of CCIs. Operational factors like planning, evaluating, and fundraising take on a new meaning in a comprehensive initiative. The management of the collaboration and the roles played by government, foundations, and charities – these too can make or break a CCI. But two matters crop up again and again: how community groups define and implement the concept of “comprehensive action,” and how

accurately and thoroughly they articulate the process of change they are trying to co-ordinate. Clarity about both these matters will go a long way to helping community groups stick to the CCI process and realize some very substantial gains.

Comprehensive Action

CCI participants generally put the comprehensive approach into practice in one of four ways.

Some undertake a very wide array of actions from the outset. In the case of the Core Area Initiative in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, over 60 organizations representing a broad range of community stakeholders took part in an 18-month planning and consultation. They identified 13 goal areas and no less than 62 actions that they wished to undertake. Vivre Saint-Michel in Montréal and the Halifax Inner City Initiative also undertook ambitious, if slightly less expansive programs from the get-go.

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While compelling, this approach comes with serious challenges. It is extraordinarily difficult to support and make progress on multiple fronts simultaneously. This is particularly true when the groups involved are limited in funds and in their experience of managing complex initiatives. As the implementation of a comprehensive plan begins in earnest, many groups collapse under the weight of the work. Those that do manage to “keep the wheels on the bus” are likely instead to see a decline in participation as members drift away, frustrated at the low scale and the pace of change that results from doing a little bit in a lot of different areas.

* The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change (established in 1992 as the Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families) has published or sponsored a roster of research concerning CCIs. A recent study is Anne Kubisch, *Building Knowledge About Community Change: Moving Beyond Evaluations* (November 2004). Download it from www.aspenroundtable.org.

These troubling experiences are hardly unique. In order to make the comprehensive approach more manageable, therefore, some groups choose one sector of activity as a “strategic driver” (e.g., housing, employer practices, or crime). While participants continue to be comprehensive in their analysis of issues and solutions, the driver becomes the focal point of their work. Over time, as the initiative matures and the participants increase their capacity in management and co-ordination, they can build in other drivers.

Quality of Life Challenge, a CCI in B.C.’s capital region, is an example. There, it was becoming increasingly difficult to mobilize support to tackle tough community problems. QoL members decided to devote their energies to engaging and cultivating local leadership from the average person on the street to the most

powerful CEO. This serves as a basis for citizen-driven initiatives to improve household incomes, to build affordable housing, and to address social isolation and exclusion across the region.

Vibrant Communities Calgary offers another example of the strategic driver. Its members have chosen to target the policy barriers that hamper citizens when they try to exit poverty. They have also identified a number of initiatives to address specific policy areas: improvements to a provincial income support program for people with disabilities; reduced fares for the city’s public transit system; and living wages for employees in notoriously low wage sectors.

The selection of a strategic driver helps a group to concentrate its efforts and avoid distraction by a myriad of issues and

Vibrant Communities

Launched in 2002, Vibrant Communities is a pan-Canadian effort to explore the potential of community-based initiatives to reduce poverty: specifically, initiatives distinguished by their comprehensive field of action, intersectoral collaboration, a use of local assets, and commitment to systematically learn as they do.

Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement coaches the participants and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy supports them with policy research and discussion. The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation provides essential financial assistance and heads up much of the work on disseminating the learnings.

Thousands of projects the world over are tackling poverty with these approaches in mind. What distinguishes Vibrant Communities is an architecture that comprises three major elements: *learning, local experimentation, and policy.*

At the heart of Vibrant Communities is a learning community of 14 cities and regions. Representatives of Victoria, Surrey, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Niagara, Waterloo, Saint-Michel neighbourhood (in Montréal), Trois-Rivières, Saint John, Halifax, Cape Breton, and St. John’s meet monthly (typically by teleconference) to develop and share practices in poverty reduction. Learning from each other, they raise the bar of practice for all. Simultaneously, they increase public awareness of poverty and their own profile as poverty fighters.

The learning community’s work is rooted real local experimentation, embodied in the Trail Builders. Six

communities (Victoria, Niagara, Saint John, Edmonton, Saint-Michel, and Calgary) receive special financing and technical support to pursue intensive poverty reduction strategies. In exchange they agree to evaluate their experience and share it with other Vibrant Communities members. Each Trail Builder initiative is governed by representatives from at least four key sectors (business, government, the voluntary sector, and people living in poverty) who are responsible for planning, implementation, and evaluation, and the overall management of the work.


Caledon’s policy work adds weight to community practice, which can be so wide-ranging and diverse that there appears to be no clear underlying methodology. Research and documentation describe CCI in terms of general principles and the details and sequence of its application.

In addition, Caledon articulates policies related to child development, training and employment,

and income security that seek to reduce the overall burden of disadvantage by tackling structural sources of inequality. This informs and reinforces participants’ efforts to turn “private troubles” into public issues (with living wage initiatives, for example). Conversely, it brings the efforts of the participants to provincial and federal levels of attention. Caledon has hosted an 18-month policy dialogue involving representatives of ten federal departments as well as all 14 members of the learning community.

Vibrant Communities is striving to root a body of analysis and public policy right in the CCI experience, so it is easier for others to go on the same journey. For more details, visit www.vibrantcommunities.ca. ■

Photo: Vibrant Communities meeting in Guelph, Ontario, 2002. Courtesy of Tamarack Institute.



*“No one can argue with the idea of a comprehensive approach to reducing poverty. But, while I hear people talk about it, I can’t say I see it very often.”
(Vibrant Communities participant)*

opportunities. The danger is that they may become so pre-occupied with the driver, even ideological about it, that they completely overlook other ways to bring about real change.

A third option taken by CCI participants is to seek out and respond to opportunities as they emerge. Given their thorough understanding of the community's dynamics, these groups are confident that they will be able to assess the value of such opportunities to the CCI's goal on a case-by-case basis and develop a comprehensive program over time.

This is the approach that Opportunities Niagara is taking in southern Ontario. Poverty reduction is their aim, and a community meeting established the priority areas to be workforce development, housing, and mental health. But within these guidelines, Opportunities Niagara is happy to "play the field," as one participant put it, and throw their weight behind actions that display the potential to significantly reduce poverty, given additional support.

The advantage of this approach is flexibility. Its disadvantage may be the same. This very flexibility can result in a portfolio of activities, many of which have limited strategic value.

These three approaches to comprehensive action are not mutually exclusive. After a year of analysis and evaluation, for example, the members of Opportunities Waterloo (formerly Opportunities 2000 or "OP2000") decided to change their purely "opportunity-driven" approach, to one that allowed them to focus on certain areas of concern – in this case at-risk youth and the working poor – yet still able to respond to spontaneous opportunities regardless of the group or the issue concerned.

The decision soon paid off. While Opportunities Waterloo was busy developing incentive programs for high school graduation and a living wage campaign, they learned that 3,000 low-income seniors, although eligible for the federal Guaranteed Income Supplement (a tax-free income support program providing up to \$5,000 per applicant), were not receiving it. They did not know about it or how to apply. Thanks to the decision to keep some capacity in reserve, Opportunities Waterloo had the time and energy to facilitate a combination of community research, outreach, and training that resulted in over 600 seniors receiving \$2.3 million in benefits. This one initiative affected over a third as many households as the whole of Opportunities Waterloo had in the previous four years.

Theory of Change

Getting a diverse group of citizens to agree on a comprehensive approach to reduce poverty is one thing. Getting them to hammer out a rigorous set of strategies and activities to make it happen is quite another.

Many CCI participants have a strong sense of where they want to start – wage rates or career prospects for youth, say. They may also be agreed about where they want to end up, like a 10% reduction in violent crime.

The CCI experience to date indicates that groups are frequently unclear about how to get from "A" to "Z," however. They pay little attention to the early to mid-term changes that set the stage for the achievement of the longer term goal, and hope that somehow "it will all work out."

As a result, they are not always as strategic as they might be in selecting initiatives. They choose instead the ones that are championed by a charismatic personality or that are receiving the most attention in the news media or that the most participants can live with. Once the choice is made, they may have great difficulty working out the details of a strategy and even more difficulty documenting the progress they are making towards their ultimate goal.

The Theory of Change (TOC) is meant to help with that. An idea that popped up in the mid-1990s, the TOC details the connections between the long-term, intermediate, and early outcomes of an initiative, and the capacities that a group requires to achieve each. Application of the TOC helps community groups to construct a "chain of results": actual changes that a CCI is intended to bring to the life and ways of a community.

This is not the same as the "logic model" that community development veterans and civil servants may know from the design of programs and services. The logic model merely requires that a group clarify a sequence of changes. The TOC requires the group to provide a convincing rationale for approaching a problem in one way, rather than some other way, in order to help achieve a long-term and ambitious goal.

There is no magic involved in creating a TOC, just a lot of hard work. In the case of Vibrant Communities, CCI participants and Tamarack staff work through a series of simple questions that clarify the major features of the community's approach: how they define poverty; where the systemic causes of poverty in their community are; where the group feels it have the most positive impact; and what specific value their participation will add so that the desired change actually happens.

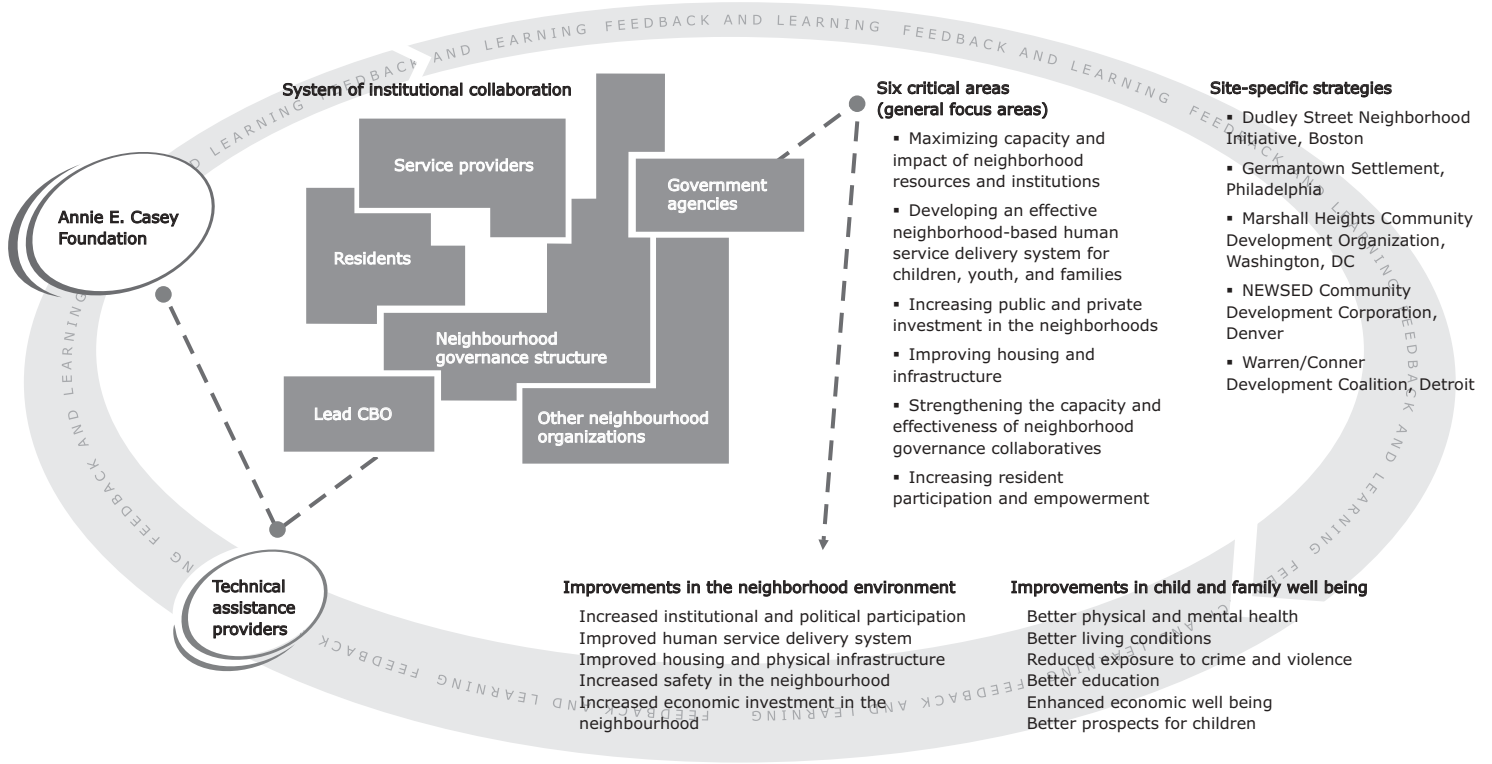
The results have been interesting.

Take the case of Vibrant Saint John (New Brunswick). Its participants determined that one of the biggest barriers to a better life for people living in "deep poverty" was the community's often fragmented, under-resourced human services system. They wanted to turn it into something more robust and integrated. How to do it?

They decided to create an infrastructure of "coach-mentors" to assist people in navigating the tangle of local programs and services. The coach-mentors document these journeys. A leadership group then uses these accounts and additional research to develop proposals for changes to public policy and for capacity-building measures in the nonprofit sector.

Vibrant Saint John has demonstrated the capacity to use this information. The Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), already has been able to improve public programs and

Rebuilding Communities Initiative



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services in regards to young parents living in poverty (parenting programs, education initiatives, housing facilities). The TOC will enable BCAP and its partners to take rhythmic, strategic action in response to reliable information about one cause of poverty in Saint John.

The TOC also supports a well-informed public debate over the strengths and weaknesses of the Vibrant Saint John approach – something that a simple review of activities could not. A better human services system – can that alone help the group achieve its goal of reducing local poverty from 24.5% to 16% in ten years? What have similar strategies achieved in other places? What does it take to set up coach-mentoring programs? Is ten years a realistic time frame in which to expect such a system to make a significant contribution to the greater strategy?

The TOC doesn't have to be a complicated affair. Opportunities Niagara offers a great example of this. It noted how many organizations and residents in the region had useful strategies for reducing poverty. What was lacking were the resources, information, networking, or skills necessary to get them off the ground. Opportunities Niagara decided to create a small body of well-connected, representative leaders to “untie the knots” that were getting in the way in various localities.

That's all there is to it: create a community resource that can untie knots so change can happen. Yet this TOC has served

Niagara well. The leadership group has taken action that has helped nonprofits secure land, facilities, and resources for 75 units of affordable housing. They also have cleared a path for initiatives that will enable 500 or more long-term unemployed residents to secure good paying jobs and training for another 90 laid-off workers. Without the Niagara group “untying the knots,” these initiatives may not have happened on the scale, had the same impact, or even got off the ground at all.

Though primarily intended to help groups make choices about strategies and projects, TOCs are useful in other ways as well.

They can provide a framework for the selection of indicators of progress. This is essential for initiatives whose ultimate success will be a long time in coming. For example, a CCI that aims to eliminate poverty may choose to encourage private sector employers to adopt progressive employment practices. Their TOC states that once more employers know about these practices, more will adopt them. So one interim indicator of progress will be the number of employers to whom CCI representatives have made their case.

A TOC can be a great way to explain a group's comprehensive program to others, too. Members of more than one Vibrant Communities project have found it difficult to explain their work to others without referring to a shopping list of activities and initiatives. A well-written TOC can capture the essence of what a

group is trying to do and turn bewildered or skeptical observers into active participants. “Untying Local Knots” has been a great way for Opportunities Niagara to summarize its role in reducing poverty in the region. “Scaling Up What Works” puts it all in a nutshell for Vibrant Communities Edmonton, which is facilitating initiatives to help people take advantage of underutilized income support programs, and to encourage employers in low-wage sectors to implement progressive human resource practices. (The “Rebuilding Communities Initiative” on the previous page is essentially a TOC, rendered as a diagram in order to explain an approach taken in American cities by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.)

Perhaps most importantly, however, TOCs support on-going and critical reflection on a CCI. Participants can get together to review their progress, identify things that they have learned, and ask themselves: Is our TOC still appropriate? Does it need upgrading? Does it require a complete overhaul?

What’s novel about CCIs is that meaningful changes are being achieved by a diverse group of stakeholders who have together devised a large-scale initiative to tackle a complex problem – & have the skills, knowledge, & networks to make it real. Usually, it’s one or the other.

And change it likely will. Over the history of OP2000 in Ontario’s Waterloo Region (1997-2000), the TOC evolved continuously as the participants grew, changed, and learned more about the nature of the systems underlying poverty and the strategies they could use to overcome them.

The group’s original TOC was rooted in a feeling that if they could encourage enough local nonprofits to shift their focus from “alleviating poverty” (through counselling and food baskets, for example) to “reducing poverty” (employment programs, links with employers, business development), the net effect would be a drastic reduction in the number of under- and unemployed residents in the region. OP2000 asked local groups to commit to making this shift. In exchange, the OP2000 network would supply them with learning opportunities, technical assistance, and better access to the necessary financial resources.

The response from the community was good (over 30 nonprofits helped 1100 residents in just over 2 years), but not good enough. OP2000 leaders concluded that the nonprofit

sector alone, no matter how well supported, could not bear the burden of reducing poverty. The public and private sectors would have to play a more prominent role. Soon after, working groups from each of these sectors were exploring ways to encourage employers to improve wages and working conditions, and to advocate change in the provincial welfare reform program.

TOCs have their dangers. They can end up taking a lot of time to develop. They can raise conflicting points of view that CCI participants are not ready to grapple with. They can appear academic at times and alienate the much needed “doers” in a collaboration. These dangers aside, the experience of Vibrant Communities with TOCs has been positive. They offer the possibility of making a complex agenda more coherent, and that does wonders for communication, evaluation, and learning.

Messy & Hard – But Worth It

The push behind every CCI is the hope that it might generate the scale, the depth, and the durable results that conventional, fragmented approaches to complex issues cannot. Yet, the very fact that it weaves together such diverse players and actions means that the journey of each CCI is unpredictable and risky.

Some, like those in Saskatoon and Halifax, have stalled in their efforts to move past the intensive start-up phase, humbled by the awesome technical and political tasks of a comprehensive campaign, or simply unable to secure sufficient resources to keep it going. Once a CCI leaves the ground, it’s common for participants to invest a lot of time and energy in a particular project, only to see it stopped cold or derailed due to factors beyond their control.

Finally, even groups experienced and competent in CCIs struggle to maintain the momentum and strategic focus of their work. Opportunities Waterloo continues to weather “campaign fatigue,” changes in leadership, and the challenges of securing multi-year funding while trying to regain the enthusiasm and widespread support it enjoyed in its early years.

Tough going and no guarantees – yes. Yet CCIs also demonstrate that, armed with a comprehensive analysis, a considered TOC, and the diverse skills and political clout of a growing membership, people can start undermining some of the structural reasons for poverty.

Vibrant Communities Trail Builders have been able to shape more productive public policies. Vibrant Communities Calgary helped nonprofit organizations to bring about an increase in provincial income support for persons with disabilities. Then it deftly shifted focus and worked with other groups to encourage the City to *reduce* the monthly public transit pass fare for the same group, when all the other rates were to increase. These two initiatives alone will put \$2-4,000 more dollars in the pockets of up to 10,000 Calgarians annually.

QoL played an important role in encouraging local municipalities to create a regional housing trust that will help build 30-80

housing units a year. Vibrant Saint John convinced the provincial government to strengthen certain features of childcare policy in order to assist young parents trying to finish school.

Some CCIs are also demonstrating how they can help the private sector take a role in innovative responses to poverty. Opportunities Niagara helped a cluster of private employers, local governments, community organizations, and the regional college to prepare long-term unemployed residents for some well-paying positions in the tourism industry that weren't getting filled. This training program also will work hand in glove with a project that will reduce the barriers to employment posed by the region's fragmented public transportation system.

In the mean time, groups in Surrey, Victoria, Calgary, Waterloo, and Edmonton are playing key roles in the establishment of regional social purchasing portals. These systems link local businesses as employers, suppliers, and/or purchasers to the nonprofit organizations that train long-term unemployed residents. (See article this edition, pp. 13-16.) Many of the same communities are working on initiatives to encourage regional employers to improve income and benefits for underemployed and low-wage staff.

For sure, there's nothing new about such local interventions, in and of themselves. What's novel is that meaningful changes are being achieved in people's lives by a diverse group of stakeholders

who have together devised a large-scale initiative to tackle a complex problem *and* have the skills, knowledge, and networks to make it real.

Usually, it's one or the other. Diverse participants agree to a simple, low-impact approach to a dilemma (better skill development as a way to reduce poverty, for example). Alternatively, participants of like mind lack the capacity to carry out their high-impact intentions.

To avoid this dichotomy, CCI participants have to figure out how to handle two major difficulties: defining comprehensive action, and clarifying how they intend to pursue such substantial change. The record shows that people are up to that learning curve, and as a consequence, can put into effect initiatives far larger in scale and far more likely to succeed than has been possible in the past. And that must surely give us hope that we can make headway on our most pressing problems and build the communities we want.



MARK CABAJ is a principal in Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement and past chair of CCEDNet's Practitioner Development Committee. Contact him at 780-451-8984 or mark@tamarackcommunity.ca. Subsequent installments under the theme of "What We Know about CCIs" will concern the identification of local dilemmas ("Wicked Problems"), collaborative governance, and the capacity required to sustain such broad-based, long-term initiatives. For more information about Tamarack, visit www.tamarackcommunity.ca.



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