

Harnessing Community Potential

The power of the collective good is evident in Canada. From our national medical care system, to old age security, the child tax benefit, the Trans-Canada highway, and the cooperative movement, this country has many examples of the collective power of people working together.

But what keeps us from working together to address overwhelming community issues such as poverty - especially in times of rapid change?

First, we have a tendency to blame someone else for the problem. The private sector blames taxes and big government for making them less competitive; the voluntary sector blames business for poor pay and work conditions; the middle class blame the poor for lack of initiative; and the poor blame the rich for being greedy. Blaming keeps us from working together and is a primary barrier to multi-sector collaboration.



Like a giant chess game, harnessing community potential requires a comprehensive strategy if we are to deal with social problems such as poverty

Secondly, there is fear. This keeps us from reaching out. We fear many things (even change itself) but mostly those things that make us feel vulnerable. In a rapidly changing economy we worry about our jobs, our skills and income security. This often leads to a backlash against welfare cheats and those not "pulling their weight" in society. This fear entrenches us and encourages us to surround ourselves with the familiar as exemplified by our election of policies and governments that promote agendas that hurt the poor.

Thirdly, there is cynicism and a lack of belief in community and the institutions that were built by and represent the community. Fuelling this cynicism is the perception that these institutions have failed us, or at the very least are not adequate to cope with the change. Blame, fear and cynicism are a destructive formula that cause inertia, fuel anger, and promote the organization of people against each other rather than with each other, working together for positive change.

CURRENT APPROACHES

People work together for positive change every day, as exemplified by a still vibrant tradition of volunteering in Canada.

But most often people work together with like-minded people. As the work of Robert Putnam shows, they bond to those like them rather than reaching out or building bridges that enable them to work with people unlike them.

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By Paul Born

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A SOLUTION

A Comprehensive Community Response and Multisector Collaboration.

We feel there is great promise in building a community-based program in which multisector collaboration is the primary way of doing the work. The work brings people in poverty together with business people, government and voluntary organizations to plan together, and develop projects together. These people from diverse sectors of society work side-by-side recognizing that no one group is the sole problem or the sole solution, and that by working together, a new and better way can be found. Only by bringing all the elements of the system together as they work toward the same goal will we find new and bolder visions. In the very act of bridging we commit to change. We will never *solve* the major problems facing us today. But we can find new ways of living together so that these problems *could not exist*.

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