

**Strategic Dialogue on Comprehensive, Collaborative Place-Based Initiatives  
United Way of Canada/Centraide Canada  
Al Hatton, President and CEO**

We were asked to reflect on five areas related to comprehensive, place-based initiatives to reduce poverty from the perspective of United Way of Canada/Centraide Canada. These five topics included: the case for supporting comprehensive community based efforts; the proof of concept; the opportunities and challenges of engagement including a funder perspective and the outcomes being achieved.

I'd like to focus on two: the opportunities and challenges of engagement from an intermediary organization viewpoint and the funder perspective but also acknowledging that United Way is both a funder and recipient of funding.

The case for comprehensive community approaches to poverty reduction is/strong but it also is costly, a long term commitment, and challenging. It's not for faint of heart. The proof of concept when done right in communities shows that it does work. Our process of evaluating outcomes achieved is ongoing for United Ways in Canada because this is the mission and at the core of United Way of Canada's new agenda.

In January 2000-2001, we went through a self reflection process at the National Office about our role. We also connected with external stakeholders to reflect on the relevance and position of United Way of Canada/Centraide Canada. This resulted in a new mission values and aspirations. Our theory of change reflects four dimensions: addressing root causes; engaging citizens; research/public policy focus; and collaborative relationships and enhanced partnerships. We developed 25 Standards of Excellence to guide the new work of United Ways and the national organization.

Our new mission is 'Building Capacity of individuals, agencies and communities; and creating long term change in social conditions'. A living example of this new way of working is Action for Neighbourhood Change which was a National demonstration project with the goal to institutionalize neighbourhood work in best sense. The partners on this project included the National Film Board, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement and Caledon Institute on Social Policy. We also engaged six Federal government departments and 5 pilot cities across Canada. The neighbourhood issues and priorities were identified by each community.

From a United Way of Canada/Centraide Canada perspective, there were two significant areas of organizational impact. We realized that if we were to be serious about becoming involved in this comprehensive community change work – it must change your organization. We also realized that Intermediary/catalytic institutions are critical to draw in partners, volunteers, raise money, build credibility, support capacity building, and advance policy work. Action for Neighbourhood Change brokered the work of various actors.

We learned that for organizations most critical challenge is to genuinely engage citizens. We know how to raise money, manage projects, attract volunteers, do policy work, write reports and getting better at partnering but new territory engaging activists and citizens. Why – they don't want to be controlled, managed and led, citizens want to be encouraged, supported, enabled and engaged. We pay lip service to this aspect of our work because it is difficult, costly in time and effort but without attention to this aspect of the work it will not be sustainable.

The Aspen Institute article underlines the challenge of citizen engagement when it comments that so often when organizations talk about building capacity, what results is that the funders/organizational sponsor's capacity is built or other partners profile and city/university/agency mission enhanced but real test is building citizen controlled networks and truly engaging citizens and recipients of services.

As agents we are caught between high vision, deep need, limited capacity and stereotypic views of vulnerable and disadvantaged communities/residents. We are forced to convince funders, partners, and boards that significant change will occur (higher \$ equals larger expectations & promises). True work takes time, patience, more dollars, and capacity/effort than projected. Balancing donor/funder expectations with engaging/transforming individuals and groups is paramount to success.

This work does change the organization for the better. However there may be governance challenges including resistances and doubt. You may lose some board members (not all bad) but gain new supporters. Both are important and you need to pay attention to the resistance learn from it but don't be captive to them.

Comprehensive is important: start somewhere (often short-term project) but also include a long-term vision. Every new initiative/project must find connections to broader goal/mission. The goal here is the alignment of everything including transforming Boards role, donor relations, staff skill sets, external partners, communications, and decision making.

Another example is the United Way of Thunder Bay. They have been involved in initiatives including 211, Action for Neighbourhood Change, outreach to Aboriginal Community expanded their work with youth in a projected funded by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation called YouthScape and new collaboration among funded agencies called Quality of Life Network. This work is not about United Way funding, or the number of agencies but rather agencies learning and strategizing together. All linked and progressive and each is attracting new partners and funders. In the old mode, these examples would have all been discrete unconnected interventions.

This new work demands focus. The risk here is that the new way of working comprehensively and collaboratively is externally focused and you may lose control (give it up). It does, however, deeper faith in people's ability and commitment to be engaged and improve condition in a community.

There needs a new business model. Those who were most successful, most in control in old model will be most often threatened because they are influential or worse they have an enormous capacity to disrupt. Get ready to face these types of challenges.

It seems counter intuitive that the more control and power you give up, the more you gain. Funders/funding can't drive work; participants/leaders must. Another benefit for us and a curse, the more you know about communities will demand that you know neighbourhoods, partners, and donors much more intimately. But you also realize the complexity of communities and in this process the more challenging you realize it is to reverse the trends. Comprehensive community approaches are stimulating and renewing but tough. As we go forward there is a higher need for evaluation and demonstrating success.

