

Determining the Value of Place-Based, Comprehensive Community Initiatives Thought Leaders Convene to Discuss Next Best Steps in Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy

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Thought leaders meeting in Toronto last week discussed the effectiveness of community-based poverty reduction programs. Their purpose was to determine whether these types of programs should be introduced as a major element in Canada's national poverty reduction strategy.

Known as CCIs (Comprehensive Community Initiatives), community-based programs are attractive to policy makers because of their sustained ability to build local institutional capacity, provide a model from which communities can learn while generating local investment and inspiring a sense within communities that change is possible.

In New Brunswick for instance, a conversation between individuals, NGOs, businesses and governments was designed with the aim to reduce poverty in the province by 25 percent and deep poverty by 50 percent. Public dialogue, followed by a round-table and the participation of the New Brunswick Business Council, has resulted in a coherent strategy that promises to engage community leaders in a comprehensive process developed in collaboration with those most affected by poverty.

Programs such as this, along with work undertaken by provincial governments to establish poverty reduction and social inclusion plans, are a strong indicator that the time is right in Canada to frame the work of CCIs more clearly and establish a framework for encouraging community initiatives more broadly. By meeting's end the group, comprised of government, philanthropic, academic and community sector leaders were in consensus about the need to initiate an ongoing national conversation about the best ways to support and advance local work - and about the poverty agenda more generally.

To that end, Vibrant Communities Canada - a 12-member pan-Canadian poverty reduction initiative led by the McConnell Foundation, Tamarack and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy - was identified as a framework upon which sustainable poverty reduction work could be built.

[Vibrant Communities Canada](#) has a nine-year history and a proven ability to forge strong relationships among local convening bodies. It provides a structure that is clear yet flexible, and - unique in Canada - has a politically neutral personality by virtue of being led by a non-government agency. One participant described Vibrant Communities as both "the glue for the front-line convening organizations" and "our ticket to success" should its conceptual framework be adopted more broadly.

Despite the consensus that CCIs are a model worth adopting, a number challenges were observed.

The phrase itself, 'place-based, comprehensive community initiatives' is not easily understood as a way to address poverty. Comprehensive is a term used to convey that the message that poverty is multidimensional and that many different factors need to be addressed in an orchestrated fashion. Community expresses the idea that solutions must be customized to different local contexts. Place-based refers to "the growing recognition that quality of place directly affects the well-being and success of individuals and families" [Torjman 2007].

Poverty reduction practitioners also grapple with how to define and measure poverty itself, an issue of particular interest to business partners used to working toward and measuring specific goals. Considerable work has been done to establish effective measures for reviewing progress on poverty reduction. The province of Ontario recently announced that it will use eight measures to assess movement on its poverty reduction plan, including the newly-developed [Ontario Deprivation Index](#).

Another facet of the measurement challenge is to consider whether it is possible to view poverty reduction efforts through a return on investment lens. Such business-oriented approaches don't easily translate to the many ripple effects associated with poverty reduction work. How, for example, is ROI calculated on a project in which business people mentor elementary school-aged children in the hopes that they graduate from high school?

Further undermining the sustainability of these programs are questions around funding, the long time frames required by the work, the central but poorly-understood role of intermediaries, leadership fatigue and a perception of indifference at the federal government level.

Even with these challenges clearly laid out, the leaders gathering in Toronto expressed a desire to see the work continue and affirmed their commitment to participate in and assist 'what comes next' efforts.

New Brunswick Deputy Minister of Social Development James Hughes summed up the meeting with the phrase: "Where there's a way, there's a will." The challenge then identified by the group was to identify specifically who will do what to take the work forward.

The group was brought together by J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement.

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Reference:

Torjman, S. (2007). *Shared Space: The Communities Agenda*. Ottawa, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, October.



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