

Comprehensive Community Initiatives: Lessons Learned, Potential and Opportunities Moving Forward

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Vibrant
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Key Messages

1. Poverty is a complex and dynamic social and policy problem, and requires equally complex and sophisticated community and policy responses.
2. Comprehensive community initiatives are a promising direction for poverty reduction.
3. While the range and focus of these initiatives is wide, defining features have emerged:
 - they are broad-based collaborations of service providers, residents, advocates, businesses, governments and other stakeholders;
 - that come together to develop comprehensive and integrated multi-level service and policy responses to poverty;
 - they are community-based, meaning both located in specific places and contexts, and being driven by community needs, perspectives and mobilization;
 - they have long time horizons and broad ambitions – working to mobilize local communities to transform the conditions and constraints that underlie poverty.
4. Research, theory and practice have generated solid insights and lessons learned on what works, what doesn't and why.
5. These initiatives have enhanced the visibility of poverty as a public issue, built creative cross-sectoral collaborations able to address the complexity of poverty on the ground, mobilized local community and public support to tackle the foundations of poverty, and demonstrated innovative different ways of addressing complex problems. However, evidence of direct and lasting impact on reducing poverty is limited to date.
6. The enablers for realizing this potential include:
 - developing an inspiring vision and coherent strategy;
 - building from solid foundations of local research, experience and community strengths/networks;
 - being solidly based – and solidly connected – to the needs and perspectives of local people and communities;
 - aligning collaboration, organization and their wide range of activities to the initiatives' core vision and strategy;
 - learning how to manage complexity and work across multiple sectors and activities simultaneously;

- developing effective evaluation strategies – including how to assess multiple levels of impact -- and building this learning back into initiatives to adapt their focus and mix of activities to changing conditions/opportunities;
- defining and pushing for public policy that will enable the initiatives to thrive and sustain themselves; and
- delivering local impact while addressing the wider roots of poverty and inequality.

Introduction

Purpose

Tamarack and other partners in the Vibrant Communities initiative want to assess the success and challenges of their and other comparable efforts, and consider how to most effectively move forward. A Strategic Review with experienced practitioners and stakeholders will be held May 10-11, 2010. This review of the literature is designed to “analyze and synthesize the most recent reports, research and evaluations of place-based, comprehensive efforts to reduce poverty and other complex issues” as background for that Review and to support participating “national organizations from the public, philanthropic and community sectors interested in understanding if and how they might support such efforts in the future.”¹

The partners in the strategic review identified five questions to guide this research project:

1. What are the different ‘manifestations’ of place-based, comprehensive efforts to tackle poverty and other complex issues?
2. What have we learned so far about the ‘practice’ of place-based, comprehensive and collaborative approaches to complex issues? What works? What does not work? What new questions emerge?
3. What kinds of supports (e.g. funders, technical assistance, communities of practice) do local communities find most helpful? In what doses and in what combinations and when? What new questions emerge?
4. What are the results of these efforts? What new questions emerge? Are the results worth the effort? Is this approach worth ‘scaling up’?
5. Where is the need and demand for place-based, comprehensive efforts to tackle poverty and other complex issues? Where are the opportunities for strengthening that environment? If and how might organizations and networks work to address these needs, demands and opportunities? What new questions emerge?

¹ From the terms of reference for the review.

Scope of Review

Tamarack asked partners and practitioners for examples of place-based research, evaluations, reports and other material on comprehensive collaborative community initiatives. They received some 300, which were winnowed down to a manageable selection. This report is based upon an analysis of the forty or so most important syntheses and overviews of the field, and a range of Canadian analyses and case studies.²

This paper does not attempt to summarize these reports directly. Rather we have identified key themes and patterns, beginning from the five questions developed to guide the review, and we have tried to analyze implications. The fundamental goal is to assess what we have learned from experience and analysis to date, and to build this learning into strategy moving forward.

Comprehensive Collaborative Community Initiatives on Poverty Reduction

Origins and Rationale

These comprehensive community initiatives³ have common foundations in aiming to address deep-seated and complex problems – such as poverty reduction – in complex social and policy environments.

Poverty is a complex problem because:

- it is shaped by multiple intersecting and cumulative drivers -- from global economic trends, to local pay levels, from shifting labour markets to racism and other forms of social exclusion;
- these structural drivers, and the resulting shape and scale of poverty, are constantly changing;
- these wider forces play out in particular places, so that the dynamics and configurations of poverty vary in different communities and sub-populations;
- efforts to address the impact of poverty and to reduce its level and severity involve many stakeholders from different community, business, government and other sectors;

² Because we are looking for broad trends and implications, we will seldom refer to specific documents.

³ We will use a short form of CCI throughout.

- the policy environment for poverty reduction is also incredibly dynamic --- not just in terms of a constantly changing array of programs and strategic directions, but all of them working across jurisdictional boundaries, with varying degrees of competition and coordination.

There has long been attention to the need for service coordination and collaboration among key stakeholders and sectors. Comprehensive community initiatives arose out of the broad recognition that the complexity of poverty required comprehensive solutions; that individual and isolated programs could have little effect. At the same time, it was also increasingly recognized that these complex social dynamics play out in particular places; that comprehensive efforts needed to be planned and located at a local city or neighbourhood level.

Defining Features

The initiatives vary along several key dimensions:

- **Focus:** the nature of the problems they are trying to solve, from improving employment opportunities for racialized communities, through addressing local health disparities, to reducing youth crime. This review concentrates on initiatives geared to poverty reduction in local areas.
- **Scale.** The size of these initiatives – and of their partner members and collaborators – can vary significantly. They can range from neighbourhood-based to city-wide; from unique projects to local adaptation of national projects.
- **Origins and orientation:** Some are more grass-roots – local residents or groups coming together to identify and address common problems -- and others are more top-down – originating with major charities or foundations or as local implementation of government programs.
- **Purposes:** the goals of these initiatives can vary from more effectively delivering programs to specific communities, through empowering individuals and communities to change their conditions and opportunities, to broad policy and system changes to reduce poverty and other social problems. While not always explicit, initiatives can be working across multiple goals simultaneously.
- **Style and process:** how the initiatives collaborate and how they organize themselves can vary a great deal.

Nonetheless, a number of common defining features of comprehensive community initiatives can be identified:

- **Comprehensive** in scale and approach, meaning:
 - not focusing solely on single-issues, and not assuming there is one correct way to solve the problem;
 - paying attention to the relationship between different elements of the initiative, rather than just the component program or organizations in isolation.
- **Multi-sectoral**: not just in the programs being developed and delivered, but the partners and approach. This can mean bringing together a wide range of community organizations and individuals working across many sectors of community service provision and activity. It can also mean different combinations of:
 - government, community and private sectors working together;
 - different levels of government and different departments and programs within governments coordinating.
- **Community-based**: Not just in the sense of being place-based, but fundamentally beginning from the interests and voices of particular communities, and having community empowerment and capacity building as a primary goal.
- **Asset not deficit-based**: Not simply seeing poverty and disadvantage, but building on the strengths and resources of even the poorest communities, and seeing building up individual and community assets as essential to progress in alleviating and reducing poverty.
- **Long horizon**: Recognizing that fundamental changes in complex issues like poverty take many years to show effect; and that building the solid relationships that underpin successful and sustainable collaborations also takes time.
- **Collaborative**: Not just many different organizations at planning tables, but developing new ways of working together on many fronts and over sustained periods and efforts.

Shifting the Debate

As well as developing innovative services and collaborations, *Vibrant Communities—Calgary* worked hard to influence public perceptions away from seeing poverty as a personal issue (i.e. people are poor because they don't work hard enough) to recognizing that poverty could only be addressed through systematic change.

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction highlighted not just the devastating impact of poverty, but positive economic development and social goals through the slogan of "Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child."

- This collaboration is actively and purposefully managed: from balancing the inevitable differences and conflicts within multi-sector and multi-partner collaborations, through taking seriously the work of communications, and building and sustaining relationships.

Community-Led

Action for Neighbourhood Change is a Canadian learning initiative launched in 2005 to explore and assess approaches to strengthening neighbourhoods. It is community building “based on the belief that inner-city residents and institutions can and must be primary actors in efforts to solve the problems of their neighbourhoods.” The importance of community ownership was also a key success factor in The Centennial Neighbourhood Project, a multi-faceted five-year project in one of Winnipeg’s most economically disadvantaged areas.

- Part of which is foregrounding power within these relationships:
 - explicitly recognizing and managing power relationships within the collaborations – which typically are a mix of large established organizations and smaller more grass-roots organizations who may not be so comfortable within professional discourses;
 - some CCIs see themselves as being about transforming power – putting control and leadership in the hands of people and communities themselves, rather than in service providers, professionals and governments.
- **Adaptive:** In leadership, management style and organizational practice:
 - to take into account and adjust to complex and rapidly changing circumstances and opportunities;
 - this generally involves both basic principles such as allowing patterns to emerge, rather than imposing fixed solutions, and responding purposefully when circumstances change; and practical planning and engagement techniques and approaches.
- **Innovative:** Not just in service design and delivery, but also in strategy and forms of collaboration and action.
- **Analytical and intentional**, meaning a serious attempt to clarify the guiding assumptions that underpin the initiative – many practitioners see this as a ‘theory of change’ approach that explicitly sets out how building CCIs can contribute to reducing poverty:
 - e.g. theory or guiding assumptions could be that community empowerment → enables individuals and communities to increase their employability, security or other assets → which can reduce their risk of poverty → this individual and community capacity building can also support mobilization to pressure policy

makers → to influence policy changes that will address the roots of poverty and inequality;

- some see value in a ‘realist approach’ that seeks to unpack contextual factors that shape project success and aims to elucidate conditions for success, rather than offering simplistic or prescriptive solutions to complex social interventions.

We won’t list all the hundreds of initiatives reviewed in the various syntheses and overviews or analyzed in case studies. Key types of initiatives include:

- local or neighbourhood-based projects in poor or disadvantaged areas – e.g. the Centennial Neighbourhood and Neighbourhoods Alive projects in Winnipeg;
- city-wide and/or broad cross-sectoral collaborations – such as Vibrant Communities;
- local community economic development or capacity-building projects – the many Learning Enrichment Foundation programs, PARO Centre for Women’s Enterprise, Trail Community Skills Centre;
- local implementation of central strategies or programs – some of these are not solely focused on poverty reduction, but on related issues such as reducing health inequalities, improving the local built and social environment, or delivering integrated children’s services – British Health Action Zones and Sure Start, Canadian programs such as Supporting Community Partners Initiative around homelessness, Urban Aboriginal Strategy, and Understanding the Early Years.

What Have We Learned So Far?

We will start by setting out high-level observations on what the research and practice literature on comprehensive community initiatives says about what has worked and what hasn’t worked to date.⁴ Our focus is on analyzing **what works, why, and in what circumstances and contexts**. We will go on to analyze what this tells us of the critical success conditions, policy, resources and organizational enablers, challenges and barriers and opportunities for CCIs moving forward.

⁴ Worked to accomplish what? We will return several times to the need to be clear about what is seen to constitute success for different CCIs in their different circumstances; how to assess progress and outcomes towards these goals; and how to identify and analyze the underlying conditions and enablers for this success.

What Works (And Why?)

This is a first scan of defining features of successful CCIs. In many ways, these can be seen as success conditions, lessons learned from experience to date, and issues to be considered moving forward.

Begin from Vision, and Build a Coherent Strategy

A consistent conclusion in the syntheses and reviews of recent experience has been that CCIs need very clear overall goals. These may be broad and ambitious – reduce the level of poverty in a particular community by a particular percentage in ten years – or more modest and specific – ensure more affordable housing as one vital precondition for reducing poverty. Whatever the scope, the most effective have a clear vision of what success for the initiative will look like – or even more broadly, of what a more equal society and reduced poverty would look like.

And then they build a coherent set of programs and activities, assemble the necessary broad-based multi-sectoral collaborations, plot out the activities so they reinforce and dovetail effectively, and develop means of evaluating and adapting as the strategy unfolds.

Build On Solid Foundations

Community Driven Policy

New Brunswick's 2009 **"Overcoming Poverty Together"** plan seeks to reduce poverty in the province by 25 percent and deep poverty by 50 percent. It was designed in close partnership with the public: using community conversations, letters, emails, surveys and questionnaires where people said what they thought were the causes of poverty and ways to reduce it, and this public dialogue was followed by a 30-member (some members with lived experience) roundtable to develop strategy.

Successful initiatives and strategies build upon local knowledge, existing capacities and resources, and wider evidence.

Build from the Local Situation

There is broad recognition that CCIs need to begin from a rich understanding of their local community. In practice, this can mean combinations of:

- developing community profiles or analyses of the nature and scope of local poverty;
- undertaking various forms of asset mapping, needs assessment, service gap analyses and other local research.

But it also must mean finding innovative and effective ways to engage local residents and community members in the design and development of the project.

Build on Existing Experience and Resources

One of the clearest lessons learned is the importance of building upon existing community strengths and resources. In practical terms, this means beginning from work already being

done by planning and service networks, and hooking into those key organizations already well connected throughout the community.

This also means building upon the legacy of collaborations that have successfully connected key stakeholders and advanced common anti-poverty and other agendas in the area in the past.

Build on Evidence

There is also clear consensus that program and planning need to be solidly evidence-based.

- Practitioners highlight the value of a ‘learn by doing’ approach:
 - probing and experimenting with smaller projects;
 - assessing innovations, identifying promising practices and directions, evaluating rigorously, and scaling up and adapting interventions proven to have the most impact;
 - creating forums and infrastructure to share experience and lessons learned within collaborations, and beyond to others doing similar work.

But this drive to be evidence-based can face challenges and quandaries.

- local practitioners may not have the resources and capacities to collect, interpret and reflect upon data;
- there is seldom enough or perfect data to answer evaluation and planning questions. This speaks to the value of drawing evidence from a range of sources and approaches, and the need to judge when we know enough to act.
- Evidence and conclusions can be disputed from various angles:
 - for practitioners, the evidence may not accord with reality in the field as they experience it;
 - for policy makers, political factors can be more important than evidence at key decision-making junctures.

These often come down to what is seen as evidence and how does it count. Traditional large-scale quantitative studies cannot capture the complexities and uncertainties of complex issues. Community-based research has great potential to yield nuanced understandings of the lived experience of poverty, and of community strengths and challenges.

Build from Strategy into Good Planning

The translation from an inspiring vision and comprehensive strategy to good planning is being clear, systematic and explicit about underlying assumptions on what the initiative is trying to accomplish and how partners think this can be brought about.⁵ There are many sophisticated examples:

- Vibrant Communities' view that change comes about at individual, community and system levels; that a strategy has to work across all these levels; and that efforts and impacts will be inter-dependent and cumulative for both individuals and communities.
- Sustainable Livelihoods Frameworks, Family Economic Success Models and other models that have guided initiatives.

Successful initiatives tend to develop clear:

- terms of reference;
- lines of responsibility among partners and collaborators;
- understandable and transparent work plans;

They also tend to explicitly build in time and resources for critical reflection and learning.

Building Planning Capacity for the Future

Good planning is never just a case of developing effective plans, but of building sustainable and broadly based capacities within the community to do good planning – and to be able to implement the plans.

Part of this is process: a common conclusion was the importance of involving local community providers, leaders and residents early in the design stage, not just for implementation. And part is underlying strategy: the principle that building community planning capacity is laying the groundwork for future social change.

Break the Project Into Manageable Chunks

The best CCIs all have a 'big picture' strategy and plan, but break it up into actionable and manageable 'chunks' to implement.

This also means planning the tempo of the initiative carefully, so that the scale and nature of changes doesn't overwhelm participants or over-run partner's capacities to manage.

Part of the challenge here is the search for 'quick wins' -- relatively easy changes that can make an immediate difference and can build momentum and support for the overall initiative and

⁵ What realist synthesis and evaluation approaches term the initiative's 'program theory.'

campaign.⁶ It may also be that it is easier for residents to get involved in smaller ‘chunks’ or projects than commit to the overall initiative. At the same time, the search for simple ‘quick wins’ and ‘low-hanging fruit’ can be illusory in complex problems such as systemic poverty and CCIs cannot spend too much time focusing only on immediate returns.

Work Across Multiple Lines

Given the complexity of poverty reduction initiatives and the multi-sectoral collaborations to address them, and given that there is little certainty in what specific programs, services or actions – or more realistically, what combination of interventions and capacity building -- will have the most significant or lasting impact, many CCIs pursue a number of actions simultaneously. The management challenge is effectively coordinating and dovetailing these multiple and often intersecting programs.

Flexible and Responsive

This requires very clear goals and vision for the future, while being flexible in adapting plans and priorities to the inevitable surprises and contingencies that arise. In effect, this means having very clear overall directions and principles, but relatively flexible specifications or parameters for individual projects or components of the initiative.

Take the Long View

There is a clear consensus that comprehensive community initiatives can take years to have effect, that building solid and sustainable collaborations takes time and effort, and that addressing the foundations and complexities of poverty is a long-term challenge.

Build in Evaluation To Adapt and Learn

Leaders argue that evaluation cannot be an after-thought, tacked on at the end of the project to satisfy funding requirements, but must be an essential component of adaptability and effective implementation. This means devoting resources, management and energy to developing an appropriate evaluation strategy from the outset.

Evaluation can also be seen as a tool for learning, and therefore as essential to the points above on flexibility, adaptability and learn-by-doing.

- as part of a cycle in which evaluation assesses success and progress against defined goals;
- then builds conclusions back into adapting programs and services;

⁶ The pressure for quick wins often comes from government and other funders needing to show progress and deliverables.

- and builds these lessons learned into ongoing organizational and community-wide capacity building;
- and all of this needs to be part of creating and sustaining organizational and sector-wide learning cultures.

There is growing support for sophisticated realist or ‘theory of change’ approaches to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of complex initiatives.

Developing indicators that can help guide and evaluate programs is also seen to be critical. The Newfoundland and Labrador poverty reduction strategy has developed fifteen indicators to assess progress on the many fronts of its strategy.

A further challenge is that partners can have different objectives:

- governments and funders can be most concerned about financial accountability or value for money;
- community providers and advocates want to know what mix of programs works best in the particular circumstances, or may be considering broader social returns on investment;
- all may wish to know what conclusions can be drawn from evaluations of specific programs that may be applicable for initiatives in other contexts.

What Doesn't Work (And Why?)

This also is a high-level analysis of the key features that can limit the success and sustainability of CCIs. These observations are closely connected to the previous section; not just in the sense of what doesn't work well as the corollary opposite of what does, but also as illustrating and reflecting ways in which successful initiatives need to be understood, designed and organized.

False Hopes/Unrealistic Expectations

The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change has been analyzing the last twenty years of experience of comprehensive community initiatives. It concludes that impact has been partial and mixed (we will return to their analysis below). But they usefully distinguish some of the vital challenges or barriers to success. They term some of these ‘theory failure’. In effect, they are asking how relatively modest expenditures, over fairly tight time periods, devoted to address deep-seated poverty in some of the most disadvantaged communities, could ever be expected to drive the complex series of inter-related social and policy changes needed to reduce poverty. They are cautioning us not to over-freight these initiatives with unrealizable hopes and expectations – against which CCIs are doomed to failure.

The challenge is to have a broad attractive vision of poverty-free communities and societies and ambitious goals for action that can galvanize and inspire, but combine these long-term goals with realistic strategies and plans that can drive the concrete series of actions and complex coalitions that will build community capacities and improve poor people's lives and opportunities.

This tricky balancing between the ambitious and the concrete is reflected in the ongoing planning and implementation challenges collaborations face:

- Collaborations cannot be built on the simplistic idea that such 'wicked' problems as persistent poverty will be solved directly or easily with a better policy mix.
- Some programs have found that trying to define poverty or targets too tightly can be divisive and take inordinate time and energy, and have tried to build unity around broad goals and visions. On the other hand, not defining goals clearly enough can make it difficult to track outcomes, evaluate impact and make the case for investment in CCIs.
- There can be conflicting timeframes and expectations among partners and between the initiative and its funders – essentially, this can again come down to funders not being able to recognize the longer and more uncertain timeframes for complex multi-sectoral initiatives.

Inadequate Planning and Processes

This is what Aspen terms 'implementation failure'. Key elements of what doesn't work at an implementation level include:

- weak planning, management and organizational capacity within initiatives and their constituent partners. This may not be just that partner organizations do not have capacities; it can also be that they have the strengths and resources, but don't devote them to the initiative – in other words, that they don't prioritize sufficiently the work necessary to build and sustain collaborations;
- long-term public under-investment in certain geographic or policy areas – and even when funding is provided, it can be inconsistent and short-term;
- collaborations not being able to balance process with outcomes and delivery, or manage many, often simultaneous, inter-related lines of activity.

There is clear consensus that 'one size' programming most definitely does not fit all. Context is crucial; and while there are general principles of successful CCIs, the principles always have to be adapted to specific circumstances and histories.

A number of common problems surfaced in the literature:

- the too common drive for quick consultations to get projects going (the classic case is the annual frenzy of governments needing to move year-end money);
- planning that does not sufficiently involve local communities and practitioners;
- using terms and techniques that exclude disadvantaged people and local residents from professional dialogue;
- focusing too narrowly on delivering programs to disadvantaged neighbourhoods without addressing the roots of social problems – e.g. enhancing access to health services for under-served populations is crucial, but will have limited overall impact without addressing the underlying social determinants of health inequalities.

Not Paying Attention to Foundations

This really is the corollary of the features of successful initiatives highlighted above. It is vital to explicitly plan and devote significant time and energy to internal communication and consensus building, developing trust and new ways of collaborative working, sustaining a learning culture within the collaboration and partner organizations. It would appear that if these foundations are not laid and nurtured, then even the best planned initiative will not likely succeed.

The Wrong Funding for Complex Initiatives

This can mean – and in far too many cases, does – that initiatives do not have enough funds to support the range of inter-dependent activities and programs that they have identified; that funding is too short-term to sustain CCIs or show impact; or the funding requirements and administration are too inflexible and rigid.

Comprehensive, collaborative community initiatives can be expensive. Few sources of funds are adequate to cover the full expenses of partner organizations, or secure enough to allow community organizations to invest in long-term capacity building. It can be especially difficult to cobble together the necessary funds from different programs pools, all with their very different requirements, timeframes and priorities.

The traditional structure of government funding can contradict the needs of longer-term comprehensive initiatives:

- short-term project based funding does not acknowledge that CCIs need stable and predictable resources to sustain themselves over years, or that their impact can take many years to show – a key role for foundations has been to take a longer view and provide more sustainable funding;

- nor does the traditional funding model recognize that CCIs have to be resourced to build partnerships and community capacity, not just deliver mandated services;
- onerous and duplicated reporting requirement take energy away from community capacity building and service delivery;
- rigid project allocation and reporting does not recognize the flexible and often changing contributions of partner agencies and organizations.

While all practitioners recognize that they need to be accountable for public funds and for meeting agreed objectives and requirements, accountability regimes can take inordinate energy and resources away from the primary mandate of community building or poverty reduction.

More generally, financial dependence on funders' priorities and resources can be a significant constraint.

Not Collaborating/Partnering Effectively

With Governments

There are many challenges in successful collaboration between government and its community partners:

- governments have not been clear – or at least not explicit – about their goals in collaborations;
- governments also tend not to be very experienced with collaborations, and their internal processes and approaches do not lend themselves to effective collaboration with other community stakeholders and partners;
- even where particular programs or departments collaborate effectively with external stakeholders, there is seldom a coherent overall approach within and across governments.

But this is never solely a question of experience, comfort or commitment – although it is important to work on broadening all of them. More fundamentally, there are systemic structural barriers to collaboration within governments:

- collaborations are notoriously and inevitably unpredictable, and governments tend to be risk-averse and bound by standardized bureaucratic procedures;
- it may be difficult for governments and funders to deal with multiple partner projects for funding and administration purposes, but at the same time, funding requirements seldom allow money to be flowed to one agency for multi-sectoral purposes;
- public management and organizational incentives are linked to achieving specific departmental or organizational priorities. Few governments have been able to develop

incentives and rewards for effective cross-sectoral collaboration. Even where there is formal support for 'joined-up' strategy, there are few incentives for actually following it through.

And from community points of view:

- collaborations with governments can seem too cumbersome for local practitioners;
- collaborations are often led by over-burdened local community people;
- government led initiatives have often ignored the voices of local practitioners.

Enablers, Challenges and Opportunities

This extends earlier sections to analyze how to build on what is working well, address what is not working and pull all this together into a coherent strategy and approach. These many initiatives did not just spring up spontaneously, and they don't automatically build community and government support easily. The Strategic Review wants to assess what resource, organizational, policy and other supports need to be in place to create and sustain successful CCIs. This can be further broken down into:

- what policy frameworks and government support is needed to support and sustain comprehensive community-based initiatives?
- what funding and other resources are necessary pre-conditions?
- what planning, organizing and management capacities are essential for CCIs to thrive and have the strongest impact?
- how can continuous learning and adaptability be nurtured and maintained?
- what are the key barriers that need to be addressed and overcome to realize the potential of these initiatives?
- what emerging opportunities will there be for CCIs?

Create a Favourable Policy Environment

Comprehensive community initiatives reveal – and rub up against – a major contradiction. The reason CCIs have sprung up is because of the failure of governments to take responsibility for social policy and for problems such as poverty and inequality. CCIs have moved to fill this gap, but the sector ultimately argues that it is state responsibility to address these social problems. An appropriate strategy to bridge this contradiction includes:

- proactively addressing gaps in social policy and provision, and thus helping to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and excluded;
- which highlights the needs to be met (and the abdication of governments);
- and at the same time, demonstrates the value of comprehensive community-based initiatives as a means to address complex social problems such as poverty;
- which both highlights to governments what they should be doing and supporting, while also helping to mobilize community and popular pressure on governments to do just that.

These comprehensive initiatives and the problems they are trying to solve are long-term projects. Government policy and funding has to also take this longer view. Luckily, a number of Canadian provinces and other jurisdictions have developed comprehensive poverty reduction strategies that can be the forum to highlight the need for such long-term commitments and perspectives.⁷

More generally, a number of countries have explicitly recognized the central role that the community or third sectors plays in addressing crucial social problems – at best, recognizing that ‘wicked’ policy problems such as poverty can only be addressed through involving community organizations and building local capacities. A number of leading jurisdictions have created comprehensive strategies or departments for the third or community sectors (British, other European and Australian governments and New Brunswick especially here), for community innovation (the recent American Office of Social Innovation), and for issues such as poverty reduction.

Different state policies, strategies and directions need to be effectively aligned and coordinated:

- strategies for the third sector need to prioritize local community-based comprehensive and collaborative initiatives as one vital part of a healthy and innovative third sector;

⁷ These strategies did not just come about because of good policy work within governments, but were the result of years of intensive mobilization and campaigning. An important part of this was CCIs, showing concretely that different policy directions were possible and mobilizing public support for anti-poverty action in many communities across the country.

- poverty reduction strategies need to recognize the importance of building local community capacities and resilience as opposed to simply enhancing service delivery, and need to see CCIs as one important part of their overall strategy;
- state funding and regulatory policies need to be revamped to support integrated service delivery, collaboration and innovation at local community levels;
- policy has to get beyond the constraints of electoral cycles and annual budget planning to take a long enough view to support and understand CCIs and address complex social problems;
- governments need to develop cross-departmental planning mechanisms and processes, and they need to ensure such 'joined-up' government is driven by clear priorities and incentives.

One challenge moving forward would be to identify the key features of multi-level, cross-sectoral public policy that would support comprehensive community initiatives.

Trends in Social Policy

Several broader trends in social policy are critical here:

“Vibrant Communities is described here as a national project. But it embodies far more than a set of local activities. It represents a change in who takes responsibility for tackling public issues. It is a small example of a big theme: the emerging shift from **government to governance**. The shift has been significant, particularly in Europe. It is a move away from governing by detailed rules and regulations set out in acts of Parliament to frame-setting legislation. More detailed regulation is left to local actors and institutions.”

Sherri Torjman *Tools for Complex Files: Lessons from “Vibrant Communities”*, p. 43.

- the greater reliance on community and other ‘transfer partners’ to deliver government mandated and funded services;
- similarly, within policy formation there is greater emphasis on broad policy networks and consultations with a range of stakeholders.

This means that there are openings to push the importance of collaboration within key government process and deliverables, and to build support for the principle of CCIs.

Leading practitioners go further: arguing that while governments are ultimately responsible for adequate and equitable social policy and investments, they must design and direct policy in very different ways. CCIs can in fact be seen as a concrete demonstration of a new more effective way of developing and implementing social policy.

CCIs can show the value of:

- taking a less short-term focus – recognizing that the impact of complex initiatives such as poverty reduction takes time;
- developing and coordinating policy and then implementing programs in a more cross-sectoral and less siloed manner:
- developing and proving the value of new and workable ways to act on the complexity of poverty and other ‘wicked’ policy problems;

Watch for Policy Opportunities

In these ways, it is important for CCI proponents to be aware of their wider policy environment so they can identify opportunities to make their case to policy makers. For example, as the provincial poverty reduction strategies being pursued in some provinces gain momentum, it may be that there will be greater space to argue for such strategies in other provinces, and for CCIs as one essential component of any strategy.

But openings and opportunities won’t always be predictable. So it is also important to be flexible and nimble to be able to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

Moving forward, an issue to explore in more depth is to identify the most favourable constellations of wider structural and policy trends, political forces and immediate issues that CCIs have been able to capitalize on.

Pushing for Favourable Policy

Context is always important – nowhere more so than in the policy realm. One of the major lines of distinction between American, European and Canadian experience is the structure and role of governments in relation to CCIs and social policy and service provision more generally. Governments tend to be major funders and players in CCIs in Europe and to a lesser degree in some Canadian jurisdictions.

Many practitioners have argued that governments need to act as enablers of community collaboration and comprehensive local action:

- providing technical assistance for good planning;
- providing resources needed for evaluation – and seeing this evaluation as part of a learning and continuous improvement cycle, not simply for narrow accountability purposes.

Practitioners have found – or at least, have hoped for – that regulation and funding with a ‘light touch’ best supports the broad and comprehensive nature of CCI work. Similarly, more

standardized application, reporting and funding requirements across programs and governments is especially useful to multi-partner and cross-sectoral initiatives.

The implication moving forward is that pushing for favourable overall state policy and for specific policy, funding and regulatory regimes that support collaborative and comprehensive forms of community action must be a major focus of CCI strategy. Securing favourable forms of state policy can be seen as one essential success condition for CCIs to thrive.

Building CCI Capacities

CCIs are a new way of working for many communities and practitioners. Transforming the way things work doesn't just happen because we all think it is a good idea. There is hard organizational and process work to be done, both in transforming organizations and working cultures, and building local community capacities.

Resources and attention need to be devoted to:

- strategic issues -- having clear common goals that both effectively guide planning and activity, and inspire action;
- building the organizational capacities of partners in the initiative – including specialized training and skills development in collaboration;
- developing new and effective approaches to manage complexity and support innovation -- this is often about getting the right balance among competing pressures and opportunities in rapidly changing environments;
- taking communications and relationship building seriously within the collaboration and allocating time and resources to it;
- building community capacities across many fronts – from research, through planning, to mobilization and organizing – all to ensure that community interests and voices drive the initiatives;
- recognizing that CCIs have a life cycle – that the dynamics of creating and building a new initiative are very different from sustaining

Web of Relationships

The success of Winnipeg's North End Renewal Corporation can be attributed to the collaboration and commitment of two Winnipeg organizations whose leaders had a crucial relationship. Yet, the founding organizations provided more than staff – they also came with established relationships with a diverse base of organizations, businesses, and government agencies. These relationships were leveraged to secure support for the new initiative and to pave the way for new contacts.

comprehensive efforts over the long haul. This allows participants to adjust to the inevitable ebbs and flows of such long-term efforts, and to see that there will be times where initiatives need to be re-orientated or even wrapped up as conditions change.

Collaboration

There is a clear consensus that effective and sustained collaboration is one of the vital keys for success for CCIs.

It is generally seen that a broad coalition of credible organizations increases public and government interest in the initiative. However, breadth of collaborations and partnerships is not the only success factor; we will see that alignment and focus are also critical.

Practice leaders emphasize that we need a sophisticated understanding of the complexities of collaboration. We can't think in the abstract, or assume that collaboration is good in and of itself. For example, we need to drill down to analyze collaboration for what purposes, and over how wide a canvas?⁸ We also need to see a continuum in the degree of collaboration from information sharing, through more program-oriented coordination, to formal partnerships and joint actions. In practical and resources terms, everyone cannot collaborate on everything or initiatives will be paralyzed. The challenge here – as in so many other areas of managing these complex projects – is finding and adjusting the right balance between wide enough collaboration and focused attention where necessary.

Community partners need a realistic understanding of differences within organizations at collaborative tables:

- some large and stable organizations, with typically some under-resourced smaller groups and over-stretched individual activists;
- different working cultures and experience with collaboration;

Beyond the Usual Suspects

A group of 75 business leaders met at a two-day conference in Saint John, New Brunswick, in October 2009. They wanted to take a fresh look at how they could become more deeply involved in poverty reduction. The “Activate” event brought participants into close contact with the realities of living on a low income, and presented them with the facts of New Brunswick poverty. It also inspired them with examples of the anti-poverty work being done by fellow business leaders across the province.

Activate was co-sponsored by the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative and the New Brunswick Business Council. It provided an entry for business people into the province-wide engagement process that was the basis of “Overcoming Poverty Together,” New Brunswick’s economic and social inclusion plan, released in November 2009.

⁸ This is one more example of an area where CCIs need to be clear on their underlying assumptions or theory – in this case, on how and why collaboration is so important.

- different purposes and interests that groups may bring to the table;
- often very different scale and nature of resources to devote to the initiative.

Collaborative initiatives can have positive effects beyond the particular project; building long-term connections and trust among community partners and laying the groundwork for future collaborations and initiatives.

Learning

A critical enabler to sustaining successful initiatives is being able to:

- understand the dynamics and foundations of poverty in particular communities and the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities;
- build that understanding into clear goals for reducing poverty and enhancing community strengths and opportunities, and an effective strategy on how to drive the necessary policy, organizational and social changes;
- translate that strategy into achievable and effective work plans and activities;
- assess the impact of these activities against goals;
- build these evaluation learnings back into continuous program adjustment and service improvements.

Moving forward, an important challenge will be solidifying and popularizing effective realist and other approaches to systematic evaluation of complex initiatives.

What Impact So Far? What Potential Moving Forward?

How to Assess Impact

We need to specify the different levels of analysis through which to evaluate impact. And we need to recognize that **impact is multi-dimensional and interdependent** – so success in enhancing individual assets by developing effective collaborations of service providers can also enhance community assets and capacities, and lay the foundations for future progress; or, more pessimistically, if we don't pay attention to changing broader structural roots of poverty, then even the most successful local programs to empower and strengthen individuals will have limited overall effect.

Moving Poverty Up the Public Agenda

If success is defined in quite immediate terms of the credibility and visibility of bringing broad coalitions and partnerships together to address poverty in their community, it would appear many initiatives have had considerable impact in:

- enhancing the profile and promoting a more progressive discourse around poverty;
- developing and sustaining effective cross-sectoral local partnerships;
- bringing credible and respected charities, service agencies, business, government and community leaders to the table;
- coordinating local resources and energy towards common ends;
- building concentrated attention on poverty reduction.

Building Collaborations and Initiatives

If success is seen in process terms -- of building and sustaining effective collaborations and coordinated planning – then again considerable success has been achieved:

- long-standing and broad-based collaborative initiatives have been developed in many communities and jurisdictions;
- it may be too early in the history of many initiatives to determine whether these collaborations can be sustained over the long haul.

There is debate on whether bringing groups together should be seen as a success in its own right, as a goal on its own; or whether successful and broad collaborations are a means to an end, to driving wider social and policy changes. This kind of tension needs to be explicitly recognized and debated, even if it may not be easily resolved.

If success is seen as supporting community capacities, resilience and social capital:

- in either the sense of enhancing communities' abilities to deal with the adverse effects of poverty and inequality or the stronger sense of empowering communities to mobilize towards changing their adverse circumstances, conditions and constrained opportunities;
- there are some indications of impact in terms of new local endeavours being created, community groups enhancing their resources and capacities, and deeper inter-connectedness within communities;
- but here too, the question is whether these kinds of results are durable and can be sustained over the long term, and what effect they have on reducing poverty.

Ameliorating the Impact of Poverty

If success is about providing more comprehensive, effective and integrated services to the most disadvantaged individuals and communities:

- we can say with confidence that these types of community-based, collaborative and integrated programming are effective – that they can deliver services effectively to meet the needs of disadvantaged individuals and communities;
- and we have a good sense of what ‘best practice’ integrated programming is;
- Investment in specific areas such as comprehensive early child development, intensive case management and support for children with behavioural or developmental problems, and customized and individual-centred wrap-around forms of service provision have shown promising impact.

Getting Individuals Out of Poverty

If success is helping individuals get out of poverty, then impact would appear to be mixed:

- many programs can point to improvement in individuals’ resources and conditions. Vibrant Communities’ sees enhancing the individual strengths of people facing poverty as its ‘bottom line’. It tracks the people who are able to enhance their skills, employability, income or other assets as a result of its efforts. The assumption is that enhancing individual and household assets will support people to reduce their risk of poverty.
- however, some analysts and practitioners argue that this type of programming does not help that many people, reduce overall numbers in poverty, or address the underlying structural drivers of poverty and inequality;
- the most comprehensive international reviews, such as those from the King’s Fund and the Aspen Institute, have concluded that population level impacts have been limited.

Local Impact

The Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction programs resulted in over 102,000 individual poverty-reducing assets. While poverty levels remained the same across the province, the number under the low income line in Hamilton fell by 1.9%.

Moving forward, recognizing the tension between individual, community and system level drivers and theories of change will be crucial.

Addressing the Roots of Poverty

If the goal is reducing poverty overall, then there is little evidence of success so far. But this may not be a realistic expectation – what Aspen terms a ‘theory failure’. Even the most effective and cross-sectoral of CCIs cannot reduce poverty unless the fundamental underpinnings of

social and economic inequality are addressed. Even the most effective community building and institutional changes will take years to show an effect.

As a result, many practitioners have concluded that they need to work towards system or policy level changes as well as individual and community impacts. So if success is seen in terms of the more immediate – and arguably more realistic – goal of winning policy changes to address the structural and systemic foundations of poverty and inequality, then impact has still been mixed, but can be seen as more promising:

- for example, many Vibrant Communities projects do target local policy changes and resource decisions, and there have been many examples of local investments and policy changes shaped by the projects;
- it can certainly be argued that the mobilization efforts and visibility of comprehensive community initiatives contributed to the development of provincial poverty reduction strategies;
- the theory of change here – not always as explicit as it could be – is that the visibility and credibility of comprehensive community anti-poverty initiatives drives poverty up the public and policy agenda and puts pressure on policy makers to act.

All of this is well recognized within the field and many initiatives prioritize mobilizing for critical policy changes to address more structural factors. Arguably, one of the critical enablers moving forward is aligning ongoing CCI activity on the ground with wider political strategies to identify the policy changes needed and to mobilize communities towards achieving them.

Emerging Questions

A number of questions and challenges have emerged from this analysis that need to be addressed to move strategic thinking on CCIs forward:

- Is collaboration an end in itself within CCIs or a means to an end? And if collaboration is an enabler of successful impact, then how is this so and how can community-based collaboration be developed most effectively?
- If a favourable public policy framework is one necessary condition for successful CCIs, then what are the key features of such a framework, and how can it be promoted?
- What is the business case – and supporting evidence -- for investing in CCIs?
- What forms of evaluation are most effective for addressing complex social problems and for grounding and guiding CCIs?

- What is the best balance between focusing on individual, community and system levels of action and impact? How can we define these different levels of impact within a comprehensive evaluation strategy?
- How can CCIs balance strong local roots and collaboration with wider strategies to mobilize and press for broad policy and system changes?

Addressing Complexity from the Ground Up: Realizing the Potential of Comprehensive Community Initiatives

This review has identified key features and critical success conditions for effective CCIs, and areas where the influence and impact of CCIs has been demonstrated. Taken as a whole, this research and experience indicates that CCIs can be effective for certain key purposes and within certain key parameters.

What Priority?

But there is another bigger question behind this: Do CCIs make enough of a difference to justify the resources and time. Do they make more of a difference than other possible strategies? In other words, should CCIs be a major focus of attention and resources for community activists and progressive forces? And if they should, then where do CCIs fit in wider poverty reduction and community development strategies?

The answer is always strategic and contextual. Can CCIs:

- Help to coordinate integrated services that speak to the full complexities of poor people's and communities' lives and conditions, and work to enhance people's assets and control? Yes.
- Collaborate with a broad range of organizations to take wider social and economic inequalities and constraints into account in service provision, coordination and policy advocacy? Yes, but this needs to be explicitly strategized and resources need to be dedicated to internal communications, consensus and relationship building.
- Deepen understanding of the roots of poverty and inequality in wider social structures? Yes, but this needs to be explicitly prioritized and resources need to be dedicated to mobilization and communications.
- Change macro social and economic policy to address the roots of inequality? Not directly.

- Build broad coalitions to mobilize to press for these policy changes? Yes.

What this comes down to is:

- Can creating and sustaining comprehensive collaborative community initiatives advance progress on those fronts where community-based organizations have the most leverage and can have the most impact? Yes.
- Can we expect the wider shifts in state policy towards reducing direct service provision and expenditure, reliance on transfer partners for service provision, and less direct governance to continue? Yes: so the opportunities that gave rise to many CCIs will remain to be filled.
- Is it worth pressing governments and policy makers to provide the funding, resources and policy supports necessary for CCIs to flourish? Absolutely yes.
- The fact that eliminating poverty directly is beyond the powers of CCIs is not the point. Are CCIs one important means to demonstrate that eliminating poverty is possible and that there are different and promising ways to advance towards that goal? Yes.
- Can showing the immediate value of CCIs help to mobilize community and public support for action on poverty and pressure on governments? Hopefully yes.

Think Strategically

In these terms, a key challenge moving forward is how to position and organize comprehensive community initiatives so they:

- demonstrate their impact and potential concretely and visibly;
- always balance their immediate activities and local goals, with a wider focus on challenging the systemic roots of poverty;
- contribute to local community and wider mobilization to address the policy and structural foundations of poverty and inequality;
- coordinate across the full sweep of community-based collaborative efforts to reinforce successes, lessons learned and mobilization.

Sound strategy and mobilization at these broader levels can widen and multiply the impact of CCIs and contribute to the wider drive to transform the underlying conditions of inequality.

Organize Effectively

Assuming that leaders and practitioners determine that it is important to continue and strengthen this model, the question then becomes how to most effectively organize and sustain CCIs. The review has identified key components: from mobilizing to challenge the wider policy context, through developing and implementing efficient techniques for managing complex initiatives in complex environments, through sustaining learning organizations, communities and cultures.

The following are key components of the adaptation that needs to take place, and key success conditions for moving forward with comprehensive community initiatives.

Context Is Critical

CCIs cannot be seen as a panacea that will solve all problems and work in all circumstances. We can see these conclusions, key features and success conditions not so much as a blueprint to be followed rigidly, but as a menu or repertoire. The challenge is to wisely and strategically adapt the appropriate mix to the specific purposes and context of the particular community and time.

This adaptation is not a one-off design decision, but must be continuous. The best of these initiatives build evaluation, learning and serious reflection into their working culture, and continuously adapt and improve their strategy and combination of programs and activities.

But Pay Attention to Basic Principles

Have a Powerful Vision

The critical starting principle is to have a vision that can be:

- powerful and inspiring;
- clear enough to effectively guide and ground action;
- capable of unifying diverse and broad collations towards common ends;
- translatable into action.

Develop a Coherent Strategy

Effective and flexible strategy includes:

- a well coordinated series of activities and projects;
- pulling together and reinforcing the strengths and resources of wide and diverse coalitions;

- enhancing and leveraging this collective strength through effective collaborations, learning and innovation;
- staying grounded in community strengths, challenges, interests and voices.

Adapt Best Practices

Experienced community agencies are able to translate their overall strategy into solid work plans and deliver on the constituent activities. The added challenge for CCIs is to do this for particularly complex social problems and with diverse collaborations.

Key elements of emerging best practices have been set out throughout this paper. They are as much about building collaborations and community capacities as efficient management; as much about communication and mobilization as service delivery; as much about learning and adapting as meeting immediate needs.

Align Strategy, Actions and Collaborations

For Aspen, this is the key challenge to ensuring future success of CCIs. Alignment means:

- not just a clear mission, vision of what success and poverty-free future looks like, and solid operating principles on how to get there;
- but building on best practices and experience to solidify sophisticated means of managing complex initiatives and webs of relationships, community and organizational capacity building, and wide and deep community engagement;
- organizing the diverse and changing mix and tempo of activities so they reinforce each other.

The most important principle and component may very well be intentionality:

- initiatives cannot simply hope that activities will have positive wider outcomes – for example, that building individual assets and opportunities will contribute to enhancing overall community capacity and reducing poverty;
- they need to explicitly analyze the inter-connected links between the social and community changes envisioned;
- this doesn't mean that everything will always go according to plan – but without explicitly grappling with the systemic and inter-dependent nature of these problems, progress will be necessarily be limited.

Balance: Get the Mix Right

All of this is always a question of balance:

- never a question of do this or do that, but of making the best judgment based on experience and circumstances – and then rigorously evaluate, and adapt as we go;
- the challenge is always how to balance the competing short and long-term, local and broader, collaboration and community building processes versus outcomes, etc.;
- the challenge is how to pick the mix, focus and directions that will have the most impact for disadvantaged communities and poor people, and the greatest potential to change the underlying foundations of poverty and inequality.

One thing we do know for sure: the kind of intentional, committed and strategic discussions that will take place in this Strategic Review are essential to moving comprehensive community initiatives forward and realizing their potential.