

**Serving the Communities' Agenda**  
**Call #3 – How Can Government Advance the Communities' Agenda?**  
A Conversation with Sherri Torjman  
June 15, 2006

Sherri, thank you for agreeing to be with us today and to share your insights. You're at Canada 2020 right now, aren't you?

*Yes, I am. Al Gore spoke last night, and Jeffrey Sachs, who is really the leading world economist in terms of poverty reduction, also spoke. He said something I want to share with you – that we “rely on Canada for sanity in the world.” What we are doing together, as Vibrant Communities and government, is very important to providing leadership and sanity to the world, and in fact Al Gore said much the same thing. Our work is important.*

*We have a very important project here, and “project” in a big sense of the word, and it is very important what we are trying to do. We are thinking ahead now, about where we want to be in 2020 and what we have to do in the next 15 years to get there. The work we are doing figures prominently in these discussions. I am feeling overwhelmed, and humbled at the same time. It is also very encouraging.*

Can you start by just telling us a little bit about yourself, and what draws you to this work?

*I think my passion for policy is about making changes in big systems that affect people's lives. My passion for community comes from personal experience – being at home with young children many years ago and finding that there was a place to go, a community center. It was such an important support – providing community for us all. It is important to work at both levels - what is real and now, and big systems changes at the same time.*

What is the “communities' agenda?” And why is it necessary to work on this?

*Equally important to the literature and the research is the work that is going on right now, that everyone on this call is involved in developing. My work is a combination of theoretical research and practical work. I want to acknowledge the work going on in this country; it is so inspiring and has very much informed my work.*

*Communities have reached a critical point in the development of their work where they are now able to collectively articulate a shared set of objectives. Even though individual communities are engaged in different work, they have a common goal of increasing the quality of life. This agenda helps ensure that communities are in a position to set their own priorities and be clear about their goals and their methods. It also helps us identify where we might need some support in creating changes. It helps us move forward together in our work.*

*The communities' agenda is a way of expressing a shared purpose. We are working on this because we want to develop shared values and guiding principles, a common vocabulary, and a common base of theory and practice. Community work is not new – it's been going on since before there was local government – but there's a new energy and strategic methodology emerging.*

*WHAT the communities' agenda is, and how to come up with a “sound bite” definition, is emerging. It is both process and substance. It's about how we organize our work as well as what we do, and those elements are starting to come forward now.*

*This Government Learning Circle is a part of developing that body of practice.*

You have based this work on the concept of resilience. Why did you select this body of literature and how is it instructive to the communities' agenda?

*There are so many potential bodies of literature that one could address. Resilience struck me from a number of perspectives. It embeds the concept of hope and prospects for a better future. That message, that is the work we are doing. If we didn't believe in a better future we wouldn't be able to carry on. It also speaks to survival, adaptation and opportunity – all dimensions of community work. Some of the literature on resilience is from an ecological perspective and some is from a mental health perspective. There is very wide ranging literature, but these are very important and common themes, that apply clearly to the communities' agenda.*

*The ecological interpretation is about ecosystems and how they survive – how they cope with pressures and threats - climate change, floods, tornadoes, disasters. The study of natural systems has been applied to study of organizations and now of communities. We understand them as complex, adaptive systems. We can look to the body of work about ecological resilience and ask ourselves how natural systems survive, and how can we apply these concepts to organizations and communities. Complex, adaptive systems are continually both struggling to survive and growing to thrive. There is continual adaptation, and also the search for opportunity. We must recognize that there will always be change and continual pressures, and to think about how to prepare for those things, whatever they might be.*

*The mental health model speaks to the importance of people being able to struggle with difficulty and cope with difficult times but come through not only surviving but actually thriving – feeling that coming through the difficulty has made them stronger. So it looks at the supports that people need – both in their family unit and their community – to really be resilient. The capacity for resilience is a combination of what is inside you and what is around you.*

I wanted to ask about the notion of communities as place-based, geographical entities. Is place important in this work?

*Place is important. We know communities can be defined differently, but from this perspective community is very much about geographic location. It is place, and there are certain kinds of changes that need to be made in place to ensure strength and resilience.*

*What is interesting about complex adaptive systems is that I tried to look at it not just in the literature, but also in what communities are doing. The major factors of recognizing and organizing for complexity are very important in helping us to building on our strengths.*

You have divided the work on the communities' agenda into process and substance. Can you explain the difference between these two dimensions?

*Process is about how communities organize, and substance is about what they do.*

*The key process elements are:*

- *Recognizing complexity*
- *Building on strengths – building on what you have, and also recognizing things that you don't typically see as assets. As an example, social housing is often seen as a negative part of the community, but is an asset when you can use it to leverage money for other kinds of things. Schools, libraries – the whole set of things that we either have and are using well, or that we have and aren't using, but that have latent potential.*
- *Fostering diversity in all forms – culture, age, gender, money, status.*
- *Self-organizing - which we interpret as encouraging collaboration.*
- *Using learning and providing continual feedback into the system.*

*Looking at those features of success, we can say that those are things we need to do in order to organize ourselves in communities. And these ideas are rooted in both theory and practice.*

*The other thing of major importance – guidance as to what we actually invest in – is the substantive component of resilience. There are four major substantive elements:*

- *Sustenance – basic needs such as income security and housing.*
- *Adaptation – problem solving skills, basic skills for coping in society, such as literacy, and also basic support networks and families.*
- *Engagement – participating actively in the community – this is essential to survival and adaptation.*
- *Opportunity – including loan funds, IDAs, skills training.*

*These key concepts of resilience help provide guidance to the substantive part of the communities' agenda.*

It sounds so logical and straightforward – is that because the theory is tidier than the reality?

*The challenge is in recognizing and organizing for complexity. The way we are currently set up doesn't make it easy to do that. We are organized in a hierarchal and linear way. To ensure communities can recognize their complexity, we have to build in new processes to enable that to happen. Government can play a key role in enabling this agenda.*

When I see an unhealthy community – it's not taking care of the basic needs of its people – there's no sustenance. In terms of adaptation, it's dysfunctional. Decisions can't get made and are in interest of the few, not everyone. People aren't engaged. There is a lack of opportunity for most people. I can describe many communities like that. And when I look at communities that are doing well, for example Waterloo Region, they are doing these things well. And it's true for the most part that in Canada we are doing these things well – not totally, certainly not in some of our Aboriginal communities. How can governments advance and support the communities' agenda?

*Government can work in three key areas.*

*The first is participation – participating actively in the community processes. For example, in Edmonton, Hamilton, Niagara – the government has been very involved in these communities. In some places, though, people don't know how to engage with government, who to contact, or how to keep government engaged on an ongoing basis. They don't know what department they have to go to, so it would be helpful to have guidance. The other aspect of this is, what does participation mean? Participation can be difficult due to things like conflicts of interest or time constraints. Even in the PCLC we struggle – people come on as representatives for their communities, but we need to look more broadly at how we can share that information with the wider community. Together, we have to think about how we can broaden that notion of participation beyond just coming to a meeting.*

*Enabling – Government can enable the kind of processes I was talking about. Helping communities to organize for complexity. Providing support for collaboration and fostering diversity. At the federal level, HRSDC is helping this, ANC also. Natural Resources is doing work around forest sustainability, and as they looked into forests they found such links with climate, and health, income, housing – they are all interrelated. Enabling can also take the form of consolidation of practices and procedures – many of you are engaged in this through Service Canada. York Region, Edmonton, Hamilton – they're all talking about this. The federal government is experimenting with a bit of this around some projects like ANC and the social economy.*

*Investing – What is needed is the consolidation of services, integrating the range of services more effectively. Trying to integrate funding, reporting systems, and evaluation protocols so that communities don't have to hand in 14 reports to different funders in different parts of government. Support for learning is something else government can do. This call is a terrific example. Also enabling diversity – there is excellent work happening in York Region and Toronto, much of which involves government being involved in providing accommodation or ensuring access.*

## Questions and Answers

Could you talk a little more about the dynamic of investing in communities?

*Investing in communities goes beyond money. It is also about improving some of the substantive elements of community work. We have some interesting examples going on in VC itself. For instance, the AISH initiative in Calgary, Edmonton's work with Revenue Canada to ensure that eligible people access tax credits and benefits, Waterloo's work around the Guaranteed Income Supplement. In Edmonton, you've been doing some interesting work around recreation, as is Montreal – not just improving the facilities, but providing support for the programs. It's not just a traditional income and housing areas that we're concerned about. We want to see an investment in a wide range of areas, like cultural programming, recreation, transportation – all of these are part of the communities' agenda. Part of it is putting in new money, but it's also looking at the way we invest in substantive areas. BC's Capital Region is an excellent example of improving investment around affordable housing.*

Is Vibrant Communities a means to an end or an end? In considering that, if it is the end result or outcome, perhaps we should look at the top government priorities and the investment in those areas and how it helps achieve the VC outcome. If it is the means to outcomes such as public health and safety, it causes me to think about risk management as it relates to resiliency. What are the other potential considerations we need to think about in moving to resiliency? Also, the role of the voluntary sector – they have human resources and management issues, in terms of resiliency, it is much more than funding. And finally, what is the role and interest of philanthropic and the private sector in the communities' agenda?

*VC is both a means and an end. It is an end in terms of what it is trying to achieve with respect to well-being, but also a means of continual improvement and continual striving. We look at outcome results and also at process. In any comprehensive initiative, you are working with two dimensions at same time – substantive goals, in this case poverty reduction, and also the changes you're trying to make in the process and how we organize ourselves as communities to make decisions, to share resources, to use assets. That is why I've divided this work into process and substance, because I think there are always those two elements playing together in comprehensive community work.*

*The notion of risk is very important. I have been presenting through a collaborative lens. But the notions of risk, competition, and other "reality" elements are important and I need pay attention to that.*

*A lot of work is being done on the roles of the voluntary sector, philanthropy, and business in this work. We recognize that the voluntary sector needs to be strong. The communities' agenda is not a way of diminishing the importance of individual sectors.*

The City of Montreal's Charter of Rights and Responsibilities has me very excited. It states a responsibility not only to look after infrastructure, but also on a civic and policy level says we are committed to the rights and responsibilities of our citizens. How does that help the work we do on a political level?

*Yes, we often refer to those international conventions and charters and say we need to hold our federal government to these international commitments, but we haven't looked at local government in that same way. Montreal is playing an important role in setting out those responsibilities on a municipal level. Can anyone from Montreal speak a little more about this charter?*

The municipal charter has two elements – the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and also the municipal government's responsibility to invest in the community. The municipality recognizes their role in poverty reduction.

The John Humphrey Centre is involved in putting forward a municipal human rights charter. They have presented in Edmonton and are excited about getting a Canadian city on board.

*The links between comprehensive community initiatives and local government across the country are important to consider. How can we promote and sustain those links? There is some work going on, but there is probably more work that we can be doing to build those local relationships.*

There was a session in Calgary a few weeks ago led by Alberta Community Development with someone from UNESCO about a coalition of Canadian communities against racism. There was a city in Ontario that is already signed this charter, I think it is Windsor.

*I want to point out that both Niagara and Calgary have done interesting work around transportation subsidies and have contributed in that way to addressing poverty by helping to reduce costs. That is a method of poverty reduction that we don't often think about, and those municipal governments have played a crucial role in making that happen.*

Is the involvement of local government an essential ingredient in a comprehensive community initiative?

*At the very least, it is important for local government to be aware of what is going on and for the initiative to know what is happening in local government. I think it would be fantastic for every local government to be involved in these initiatives. Really it would be ideal for all orders to government to be involved. A link in terms of information is essential. We also want to know what the anticipated action might be. If a local government is planning to do something that will affect a community it is important that we know about that early on, and perhaps we can even have some impact on that.*

I do think it is essential. There are so many areas where municipal policy and plans significantly impact community. In my experience, when the municipality is around the table to start, even just to provide information, there is a lot better opportunity for outcomes.

There are competing interests that have to be converged into a vision of the community and what they want to see happen. A review of land use planning in Niagara has grown to also include social planning. All of these things are part and parcel of the overall community, and it needs to be part of the political agenda. Local government must participate in this type of thinking, or they will become alienated or unable to foster community development and community values. Imagine Chicago is based on idea that public service is a form of friendship. In Niagara we're also beginning to be engaged with Greater Niagara in the U.S.; we are dealing with the same issues even though we are in different countries.

*Eric and I are involved in organizing discussions around policy work for communities, learning from each other and share together. A common theme is that all the communities have been saying that the earlier you can work with public officials, the better it is for all concerned.*

It appears to me that in small communities, the greatest success is where the municipal officials are on-side. If they are neutral, that is okay. If they decide to block it, and are negative, position power kicks in and it is very difficult.

Local government has role in convening and facilitating broad engagement so that the communities' agenda is an inclusive one. Often strong, vocal community groups say that they represent community, but sometimes there is exclusivity connected with their vision.

*Coherence, too. Edmonton is well ahead of the country in terms of comprehensive community initiatives, and at the same time there is a lot of effort in planning to bring all that energy together so that people know what is going on and what other groups are thinking.*

What about mechanisms that enable government and community collaboration – what are you seeing in the literature about the developing of mechanisms and what they look like? In VC, we have roundtables bringing partners together early in the process. There are also individual government officials operating in a way that supports the efforts of communities to find new solutions and facilitating connections within government systems in regards to the community's needs and interests. Do you see some analogies that exist between these and the literature on resilience?

*The literature on resilience doesn't provide enough guidance in this regard. What does is the community development literature. The challenge for us is to write about what we understand together and to share those concepts and build a body of knowledge and practice. Around the communities' agenda, a lot of inspiration will come from the literature, but a lot will also come from the work that is going on.*

