

Le Chantier in Saint-Michel – Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion

How do comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives contribute to poverty reduction? The six Trail Builders in Vibrant Communities are experimenting with a variety of approaches. This series documents their experiences. For each Trail Builder, an initial story will present the key ideas guiding its work: how local partners understand poverty, the role they can play in reducing poverty, their goals and the core strategies to achieve results. Subsequent stories will provide annual updates on progress, challenges, lessons and adjustments. Vibrant Communities is a pan-Canadian initiative in which representatives from 15 urban centres have come together to explore local solutions to poverty. Trail Builder initiatives will provide insights that fuel the learning within Vibrant Communities and with others interested in the role that collaborations can play in tackling poverty.

Introduction

The March 2004 launch of *Le Chantier de revitalisation urbaine et sociale* (a task force for urban and social revitalization) in the northern Montreal neighbourhood of Saint-Michel was a fresh page in the story of this densely populated, low-income and culturally diverse area. *Le Chantier*, an offshoot of an earlier community revitalization initiative known as *Vivre Saint Michel en Santé*, is evolving to specifically address the issues of poverty reduction and social inclusion.¹ With the assistance and support of *Centraide* (United Way) of Greater Montreal, Vibrant Communities and several municipal partners, *Le Chantier* has helped create a sense of optimism about the future among Saint-Michel residents. Now in its third year of operation, *Le Chantier* continues to mobilize people and resources, and to strengthen its links with partners inside and outside of the neighbourhood.

Le Chantier is uniquely shaped by the territorial and social characteristics of Saint-Michel. Until the turn of the last century, Saint-Michel was a small farming community of about 1,000 people. Postwar settlement of returning soldiers, a large influx of Italian immigrants, the growth of the City of Montreal generally and local industrial development – driven by the expansion of the Miron and Francon quarries – caused Saint-Michel’s population to swell to 64,000 by 1964. The quarries are a defining characteristic of the area. Essentially, they are 20-storey-deep pits which occupy 42 percent of the land mass of the community and divide it into three distinct geographic areas. In addition, Saint-Michel is bisected east to west by the Metropolitan Autoroute – a major arterial highway which was built in 1960.

Many immigrants have been drawn to Saint-Michel by the potential of jobs, less expensive land and the absence of zoning and planning regulations. Small workshops and factories have grown up alongside residential housing units, giving Saint-Michel a patchwork appearance.

Saint-Michel’s relatively prosperous early years were followed in the 1970s and 1980s by economic decline and subsequent political marginalization. In 1968, the Miron quarry closed and was transformed into a massive garbage dump. Similarly, in 1984, the Francon quarry ceased operations and became a snow removal storage area. The local economy went into substantial decline as did the community’s self-image. In addition, Saint-Michel suffered from increasing political marginalization when it lost its status as a municipality in 1968 and became part of a ward of the City of Montreal.

Worsening economic conditions and the arrival of a number of different cultural groups led to the increasing ghettoization of Saint-Michel and other nearby neighbourhoods. Poverty levels rose and the transient nature of the population increased correspondingly. Saint-Michel became recognized as a place for those seeking low-cost rental housing and a reception area for new immigrants. By 2003, visible minorities comprised some 42 percent of the population (compared with 29 percent in Montreal), of whom 43 percent were North African, 19 percent were Latin American and 17 percent were from Southeast Asia.²

The conditions for change

Saint-Michel residents face a range of housing and social challenges. Currently numbering 60,000 residents, their neighbourhood has the highest population density in the city; almost double that of Montreal as a whole. The area has an extremely low level of owner-occupied lodgings (33 percent). Lone-parent families constitute 29 percent of the population.

In 2001, Saint-Michel’s residents had the lowest level of education in Montreal; 30 percent had less than nine years of schooling, compared with 15 percent for the rest of the city. The school drop out rate was 33 percent. Saint-Michel’s child mortality rate is 8.5 per thousand compared with 5.6 in Montreal, although the life expectancy level is the same as the rest of the city (78.2 years of age). Unemployment was 12.6 percent in 2001, 3.0 percent higher than the city’s overall rate, while the average annual income was \$18,841 – almost \$10,000 below the Montreal average.

Census figures from 2001 also indicated that 25 percent of household earnings came from government transfer payments and 40 percent of residents lived below Statistics Canada's low income cut-off (LICO); 72 percent of those below LICO were lone-parent families.

Encouraged by the citizen action movement in the 1960s and 1970s, *ad hoc* groups in Saint-Michel began to form in the 1980s around social service and charitable initiatives. Environmental issues associated with the dumpsites in the two former quarries became rallying points for resident action in the 1980s. *Vivre Saint Michel en Santé* (VSMS), a local chapter of the Canada-wide Healthy Communities movement, was established in 1991.³ In 1997, VSMS began operating under a tripartite agreement with the City of Montreal, Centraide of Greater Montreal and the City of Montreal Office of Public Health.

By 2000, VSMS had decided to target its efforts on a few selected areas: mental health, youth, family, seniors, food (including the establishment of a public market) and overall strategic planning. After a decade of work, VSMS has mobilized resources, engaged more people in its work and improved access to services. Yet Saint-Michel remained one of the poorest districts in Montreal. Poverty reduction and social inclusion became the *raison d'être* for *Le Chantier*.

Where VSMS focuses broadly on quality of life issues (e.g., access to services) and its members work largely with government agencies and existing service providers, *Le Chantier* has embarked on a long-term, integrated strategy aimed at broadening the participation of local citizens and extending the

project's reach into new sectors, especially the newcomer and business communities. Both VSMS and its offshoot initiative, *Le Chantier*, play important roles in the overall revitalization of Saint-Michel. A governance study is currently under way which will refresh and update the structure of this multidimensional, multi-sectoral approach to poverty reduction.

Definition of poverty

Le Chantier and VSMS members believe that poverty and social exclusion result from a lack of financial and personal assets (e.g., education, skills, language and cultural access). The sum of these deficits is greater than the parts: a lack of both financial and personal assets essentially denies individuals of their personal power to shape their own affairs. The grassroots history of VSMS has helped to establish a poverty reduction process based on resident engagement and participation. The recent establishment of *Le Chantier* signals a widespread recognition that individuals or organizations acting alone cannot affect the degree and range of poverty reduction initiatives required to transform their lives or their communities.

Le Chantier's efforts to expand partnerships – especially in collaboration with government structures or agencies based outside the neighbourhood – is helping to provide the funding, technical assistance and other supports that are needed to enable local residents and organizations to act on the various initiatives that will improve conditions in Saint-Michel. The decision to become involved with Vibrant Communities is further evidence of a broader effort to explore and learn from others and strengthen a formerly local initiative aimed

at poverty reduction. In essence, *Le Chantier* creates a space where residents and other partners can articulate and mobilize an ambitious and exciting plan of action for neighbourhood revitalization and poverty reduction.

Structuring the work

With a prime objective of enabling families to flourish, *Le Chantier* set out to tackle poverty and social exclusion in three priority areas:

- helping individuals develop their capacities, obtain work and earn enough income to meet their own and their family's needs
- developing accessible affordable housing
- obtaining access to diversified quality services, particularly in the areas of culture, sports, recreation and commerce.

The VSMS Strategic Planning Committee's members are drawn from local businesses, community organizations and institutions. They currently oversee the operations of *Le Chantier*. The project's initial goals were to assemble a community profile, hold consultation sessions, build a plan of action to combat poverty and social exclusion, and propose a 10-year vision. These tasks were completed in November 2004 and were incorporated into *Le Chantier's* Plan of Action for 2005-2008. The plan was approved by a General Assembly of VSMS in December 2004. Organizers agreed on five broad strategies to achieve their goals. The accomplishments to date and future plans for each strategy are outlined below.

i. Increase and reinforce partnerships:

To further promote *Le Chantier* and to advertise the new spirit taking hold in Saint-Michel, a one-day, high-profile event was held in September 2005. Leaders and supporters not directly involved in the project work were brought in to tour the district, all partners supporting *Le Chantier* were invited to convene sessions, local people were encouraged to attend and an information bulletin was distributed across Saint-Michel. Twenty external partners, 100 local partners and 250 citizens participated in the event and 23,000 copies of an information sheet were distributed. A six-minute film about the event was produced by a local film maker.

Also in 2005, *Le Chantier* decided to form partnership clubs around each major priority and strategic file. Club members are stakeholders who are interested in supporting the implementation of a specific initiative or plan. Partnership clubs have been established for the housing and citizen participation priorities. Future plans include developing a strategy for engaging at least 15 businesses in the project, increasing resident awareness of *Le Chantier*, producing a 10- to 15-minute film about the work of community mobilization and establishing three additional partnership clubs. These will focus on efforts to revitalize Jarry Street (a business thoroughfare), support sport and recreation initiatives, and provide direction for work on security.

ii. Reinforce citizen participation: Le

Chantier estimates that between 700 and 1,000 residents have been associated with the project to date. The citizen participation part of the Action Plan has received the most project

funding of all its elements and totals \$140,000 (of the \$260,000 donated so far to launch projects). A further \$400,000 has been donated by the Bronfman Foundation, the Government of Québec, the City of Montreal and *l'Arondissement Villeray/Saint-Michel/Parc Extension*. All of these funds will be used for youth engagement activities to clean up the environment. In its December 2005 report, VSMS reported that *Le Chantier's* momentum has leveraged a further \$400,000 for projects which are part of its Action Plan. Many of these projects will be managed by other organizations.

An example of the type of work being done to advance *Le Chantier's* efforts on citizen participation is called the *Voisinage du 21^{ème} siècle* (Neighbourhood of the 21st Century). Its goal is to mobilize neighbours in a 300-dwelling radius in a targeted area. Another participation project – organized by one of *Le Chantier's* partners – involved setting up three café-style meetings in parts of Saint-Michel where diverse cultural groups were able to meet and get to know each other. Some 20 citizens now meet regularly in each of the three areas. A third participation project operated two youth dialogues to involve area youth in planning group initiatives.

iii. Intensify action in all priority areas of the plan of action: *Le Chantier's* strategy has been to look for opportunities and resources to achieve some early successes and strengthen the new, positive community spirit. Organizers have initiated 14 of 34 projects identified in the initiative's action plan. Six of the 14 projects are aimed at raising individual and family incomes, four focus on affordable housing and four are designed to increase resident involvement in the areas of culture,

recreation and commercial services. Several of these projects are outlined below.

In the area of raising incomes, the Training for Local Employment Project will recruit and train residents to meet the needs of local and area businesses and industries. Working in partnership with the *Commission scolaire de Montréal* (CSDM) and the *Centre de formation en Alimentation de Québec*, an initiative of the major food chains, training has been developed which will commence in the spring. It will focus on recruiting candidates primarily from Saint-Michel and, to a lesser degree, from two nearby neighbourhoods.

With respect to affordable housing, work has been done to identify and obtain access to, or the ownership of, certain properties and buildings in Saint-Michel. If developed, this additional housing would encourage newcomers and youth to live in the neighbourhood and would provide an incentive for existing residents to stay. The aim of this undertaking is to increase the social cohesion and diversity of the residential population by making available housing which is affordable to a range of incomes.

The Action Plan also recognized the strategic value of cultural and artistic activities and their potential to reduce exclusion, promote citizen participation and stimulate economic development. Creating opportunities in these areas were seen as a means of strengthening self-esteem, teamwork and intercultural dialogue within the community. Jointly, the *Commission Scolaire de Montréal*, the *Cirque du Soleil* and *Le Chantier* identified the opportunity to develop a pilot program within the school system directed at promoting arts and culture with children and youth. The focus of the project is to introduce preschoolers

between the ages of 4 and 5 to the arts and to cultural activities. Three disciplines were chosen: dance, film and circus arts.

iv. Review and refresh the VSMS governance structure and relationships created among government, institutions, community organizations: A Ph.D. student from the University of Montreal (*l'École des hautes études commerciales – HEC*) has been hired to conduct the review. The work on this project has been slower than anticipated. However, the goal for 2006 is to have the new VSMS administrative structure in place, along with the appointment of a formal Steering Committee for *Le Chantier*. The new Steering Committee will meet at least five times and each of VSMS's action committees will also have developed its own strategic plans.

v. Sharing experience and evaluation: *Le Chantier* members will continue to refine four evaluation projects, including the evaluation framework for its individual projects, the continued evolution of the initiative's theory of change, participation in Vibrant Communities' face-to-face meetings and presentations about their work to other neighbourhood revitalization initiatives. City of Montreal staff will concurrently assess the work done by municipal departments in Saint-Michel and five other low-income areas identified jointly by the city and province. The resulting municipal report will help inform *Le Chantier*'s ongoing evaluation work. The initiative's steering committee will appoint an individual who will be specifically responsible for evaluation.

Looking ahead

Future challenges faced by *Le Chantier* include growing the partnership base and consolidating the work under way while maintaining a clear focus on poverty reduction and social inclusion. More effort will be directed toward engaging Saint-Michel's many cultural groups, investing in local leadership development and reaching out to its business community.

Members appreciate the central importance of citizen participation and the hopeful energy that their involvement gives to the project. By continuing to nurture a shared understanding of Saint-Michel's past history and present circumstances, the plan of action will continue to evolve in a manner which is consistent with local experience. Organizers feel that by keeping the project's work plan tightly focused on a few, core priorities, they can create an effective tool for overcoming silos and barriers to participation.

Reinforcing a culture of cooperation and supporting and investing in the local leadership were identified by participants as key elements in sustaining the change process. As a demonstration project, members of *Le Chantier* recognize the need to collect baseline data and establish clear benchmarks against which progress can be assessed. All parties want to stimulate the emergence of local leaders and to continue challenging and changing the prevalent poverty culture.

Increasing participation and partnerships will continue to be a key priority. *Le*

Chantier members understand the summative effect of participants' contributions and have coined a playful catchphrase to describe their desired relationship with partners: they wish to create *un réseau de conspirateurs* (a "network of conspirators").

The need to continually secure operating funds is an ongoing challenge for initiatives like *Le Chantier*. Although recent experience demonstrates there has been a shift from institutional to community development and that *Le Chantier* has had modest success in attracting investment for some of its projects, the dangers of funding categories is ever present. The importance of keeping all levels of government focused on community needs and priorities – rather than funding projects on a case-by-case basis – is an overarching issue which will affect the potential of *Le Chantier* (and others) to succeed.

In order to sustain the continuity of VSMS and *Le Chantier*'s work, longer-term commitments will be essential if poverty is to be significantly reduced. *Centraide* of Greater Montreal and the City of Montreal have recognized this fact; they hope others will do the same.

Significant investment in a poverty reduction strategy also must be spread across a sufficiently long time period. It took 30 years for Saint-Michel to arrive at its current state. Reversing it will require an intensive and prolonged human and financial investment.

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Endnotes

1. *Le Chantier* is also the abbreviated name for another, more widely recognized organization in Quebec – *Chantier de l'économie sociale* (the Social Economy Taskforce).
2. Saint-Michel profile, December 2003.
3. The international Healthy Cities movement was first conceived in Canada in 1984 as a result of the *Healthy Toronto 2000: Beyond Health Care* symposium, and was launched in Europe in 1986 by the World Health Organization (WHO). The movement's objective was to improve the quality of citizens' lives by working for and with them. In Canada, where it was called *Healthy Cities and Towns* in Quebec and *Healthy Communities* in the rest of the country, the movement was officially launched in 1987 in the municipality of Rouyn-Noranda. Over a period of three years, from 1988 to 1991, Health Canada funded a Canadian secretariat to promote the development of a national network, based in Ottawa and located in the office of the Canadian Institute of Planners. For more information on the Healthy Communities movement, visit: <http://www.fsi.ulaval.ca/oms/p2En.html>
4. Ndiaye, S., J.-M. Fontan, M. Bouchard, B. Levesque and M. Mendel. (2003). *ARUC – Projet de recherche sur les quinze ans de la table de concertation*. Montréal : Vivre Saint-Michel en Santé, Phase 1.

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