

Mid-Term Assessment of the Vibrant Communities Initiative

Final Report

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Executive Summary

1. Purpose

The mid-term assessment of the Vibrant Communities initiative is the second of three reviews that the consulting firm of C.A.C. International has been asked to do on behalf of the sponsor organizations of Vibrant Communities. The purpose of the mid-term assessment is to assist in the further development of the overall Vibrant Communities initiative, and particularly the Pan-Canadian Learning Community (PCLC), by creating an opportunity for its members to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of its operations, and put forward recommendations for change.

2. Methodology

The first data collection step in the mid-term assessment was a detailed questionnaire sent out by e-mail to each of the communities participating in the Vibrant Communities initiative. The Convenor Lead and a small group of core participants were asked to collectively complete the questionnaire. The second data collection step involved follow-up interviews with the Convenor Lead from each participating community and two representatives from each of the three Vibrant Communities sponsors. The purpose of these interviews was to discuss in greater detail the key issues that emerged from the initial questionnaire. In addition to these elements, the mid-term assessment also analyzed responses from a much shorter questionnaire distributed to a sample of local working group members.

3. Summary of Key Findings

3.1 Overall Appreciation of the PCLC

Local convenors and community members overwhelmingly acknowledge the high quality of expertise that has been made available through the PCLC. Convenors and community members are also very appreciative of the opportunity to enter into contact with other individuals and groups across the country working on similar issues. This offers the opportunity for communities to exchange experiences on work carried out to date and to learn from what others have accomplished. The majority of respondents also feel that they have the opportunity to provide feedback on the work being carried out through the PCLC and input into the planning of learning initiatives.

Community representatives feel that the learning opportunities offered through the PCLC address important aspects of their work, and several note that the topics are generally timely and of increasing interest to their community. Events that offer the opportunity for peer-to-peer learning through the exchange and sharing of lessons learned between communities are deemed to be particularly useful, especially when they are carried out face-to-face.

Community and sponsor representatives alike feel that the PCLC is gaining momentum as it evolves. Overall, interest and participation in learning events continues to grow and new partners continue to be added to local efforts. At the national level, the initiative has attracted a great deal of interest and a growing involvement from various sectors.

3.2 Challenges Facing the PCLC

The PCLC also faces a number of important challenges:

⇒ *Ensuring that Learning is Relevant to Participating Communities*

A key challenge for the PCLC is to offer learning that is specific enough to make it meaningful for communities interested in the topics, yet general enough to ensure that as many communities as possible are engaged. In order to ensure that learning themes are relevant, the participation of communities in the planning of learning themes and events is critical. While the majority of convenors interviewed feel as though they are able to voice their opinions on the events organized through the PCLC, the input provided by communities could be provided in a more effective and strategic way. At the community level, input from individuals beyond the local convenor should also be ensured, yet there is concern that many convenors are providing input into PCLC planning without a formal local learning plan or the participation of a broad range of individuals or groups.

⇒ *Ensuring that Learning is Practical and Applicable to Local Work*

Learning opportunities provided through the PCLC are deemed to be of increasing practical value to local poverty reduction efforts, although the applicability of learning continues to be a topic of concern for many community representatives. Several strategies to make learning more practical have been proposed, including:

- A continued shift away from theoretical or conceptual learning.
- More peer-to-peer learning and a focus on community experiences.
- Integrated learning activities around key issues.
- Follow-up on the implementation of learning principles.
- A greater emphasis on the coaching support.

⇒ *Managing Learning within Participating Communities*

The heavy time commitment that membership in the PCLC involves for participating communities has been a topic of some concern since the beginning of the initiative. This theme involves a number of key issues including:

- *Identifying the learning events and supports of most interest:* Some communities are still trying to understand all the various facets of the initiative and the types of supports offered, although there has been some important progress in this area.
- *Maximizing the efficiency of PCLC events:* Some learning events could be better streamlined to ensure a more efficient use of time.
- *Staying realistic:* Many communities feel overwhelmed by the amount of resources and events offered through the PCLC.
- *Decentralizing leadership at the community level:* Many local convenors are taking on too much, and clearly some local convenors have been more successful than others in decentralizing leadership within a wider group of key individuals.

⇒ *The Dissemination of Learning at the Local Level*

There is a desire among sponsors and some community representatives to see learning disseminated to a larger number of individuals and groups within participating communities. There are two principal mechanisms through which the participation of a wider segment of the

local participation in learning may be explored: 1) the expansion of PCLC events to ensure that a higher number of participants take part across the country; and 2) greater support to local convenors and leads for the dissemination and transfer of learning acquired through the PCLC at the local level.

⇒ *Deepening Relations between Participating Communities*

For many community representatives, the opportunity to deepen relationships with colleagues across the country and to gain a greater understanding of what is being done in other regions is one of the primary reasons for their participation in the PCLC. However, community and sponsor representatives feel that more needs to be done to deepen these linkages. A number of possible strategies have been suggested, including:

- More face-to-face meetings.
- The provision of more detailed information on each community.
- Encouragement from national sponsors to build informal contacts.
- The use of mentoring.
- The establishment of sub-groups or learning clusters around criteria including: geography; learning themes; community type or size; and phase of operations in Vibrant Communities.

3.3 Assessment of the Vibrant Communities Model

Key strengths of the overall Vibrant Communities model include:

- An innovative approach that has created partnerships between a wide range of local and national actors that rarely have the opportunity to work together.
- The opportunity to bridge the gap between policy making at the national level and poverty reduction work at the local level.
- The integration of a mechanism through which policy can be articulated and disseminated.
- The Pan-Canadian nature of the model which gives a greater level of visibility to the work being carried out by the various partners.
- A strong overall leadership from three dedicated and well-respected sponsor organizations.
- An open, welcoming and respectful environment which allows people from a variety of backgrounds to feel comfortable within its activities and structures.

Some key limitations of the model include:

- The relatively limited resources available through the initiative (particularly for communities in phases I and II) and the somewhat unrealistic expectations in terms of where communities would be in the development and implementation of their poverty reduction plans.
- To a large extent, the leadership of the initiative remains concentrated in the hands of the sponsors.
- The encroachment of the initiative on the time of those working at the local level.

3.4 Relations between Vibrant Communities Partners

Relations between Sponsors

The relationships that exist between the three sponsors are extremely supportive, and there is clearly an exceptionally high level of respect and trust between the three organizations. As Caledon and Tamarack are most closely involved in the day to day operations of the initiative, their collaboration is particularly close.

Relations between Communities and Sponsors

The relationships between sponsors and community partners are also very positive. One of the principal strengths of the initiative is that the linkages within Vibrant Communities are not seen as the traditional funder / recipient hierarchical relationships that characterize most poverty reduction initiatives. Instead, the relationships represent a true partnership between organizations with a great deal of mutual respect and common objectives.

The relations that exist between sponsors and local communities vary a good deal. The communities that are further along in the initiative (i.e. the Trail Builders) and those that are consistent participants in learning events are generally those with whom the relationships with sponsors are closest. In the majority of cases, the relationships between sponsors and communities are largely centred on the local convenors.

4. Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

The Vibrant Communities is a highly ambitious initiative that has achieved some significant results to date. A number of participating communities have developed and are currently implementing comprehensive, multi sectoral poverty reduction initiatives at the local level. A strong national learning community has been established with a growing level of interest and participation from local and national participants. Various policy documents have been produced and policy discussions have involved a strong representation of various sectors. Meanwhile, efforts to bring additional funders on board are giving reason to be optimistic that the initiative will continue to expand in the years to come.

Vibrant Communities model and its various components, namely the Pan-Canadian Learning Community, also face a number of important challenges. Many of the challenges faced are inherent to the type of initiative being undertaken, such as providing activities and supports that meet the needs and interests of the various participating communities. It is also evident that learning requires significant investment on the part of local leaders to be of value. As participants share experiences and lessons learned, and communicate in an increasingly open and constructive manner, learning will become increasingly relevant. Still, investment in learning can be difficult for many participating communities; it requires human and financial resources that very few organizations working at the front lines of poverty reduction can afford.

Multi sectoral collaboration and systemic change are clearly processes that take time. Given the limited resources available to participating communities through Vibrant Communities (particularly those in phases I and II), progress is likely to be slow and patience is critical. At the same time, it is also clear that progress largely depends on the capacities and resources of the participating communities. Some communities have benefited from existing partnerships and solid

resources to move forward quickly, while others have struggled with some of the preliminary steps relating to multi sectoral collaboration.

It is also evident that the initiative revolves to a large extent around the experiences of the Trail Builders. All are in the process of implementing collaborative, multi sectoral poverty reduction strategies at the local level, and representatives of these communities are generally more engaged in the various facets of the initiative and perceive it to be more important to their local work than non Trail Builders. In many ways, these communities represent the glue that bonds Vibrant Communities and the PCLC. Other participating communities are interested in learning from these models as they eye an eventual graduation to Trail Builder status, and it seems important to focus these communities on the goal of reaching Phase III by injecting additional resources for the years to come.

As the initiative moves forward, the importance of identifying new sources of funding to expand its activities becomes increasingly clear. However, with this also comes the importance of taking stock of what has been accomplished to date, a sensitive topic that must involve the definition of results and specific indicators.

In order to respond to the key challenges facing Vibrant Communities that are discussed in this report, the following recommendations are proposed:

To make learning as relevant and practical as possible to participating communities:

- Sponsors and participating communities should explore new and more strategic mechanisms through which communities may provide input into the planning of the initiative.
- Sponsors and participating communities should continue to experiment with learning formats that offer a greater opportunity for peer-to-peer learning, as well as a greater leadership role for communities in the presentation of learning topics and information.
- Sponsors should clarify and explain in more detail the coaching support, and each community should be assigned a specific individual that will provide ongoing coaching assistance to their local efforts.

To make local participation in Vibrant Communities more manageable for local leads:

- Sponsors should consider reducing the number of events organized through the PCLC or focusing the learning on a smaller number of key themes, using an approach that integrates the various supports provided through the PCLC.
- Local convenors, with the support of coaches, should renew and deepen their efforts to establish and/or strengthen local working groups in each community in order to ensure a decentralization of leadership and a broader representation of local participants.

To promote a broader dissemination of learning at the local level:

- Local convenors, with the support of other local leads, coaches and sponsors, should explore the most effective means to disseminate learning at the local level to the broader community.
- Sponsor organizations should prioritize the consistent translation of learning events and activities into French.

To foster stronger inter-community relationships:

- New mechanisms through which relationships between communities may be deepened should be explored, including mentoring or the establishment of sub-groups and learning clusters.
- Sponsors should ensure that local convenors and learning leads have access to detailed information on the activities of each participating community, including names and contact information for key individuals.

To deepen the body of knowledge being created and disseminated through the initiative:

- Sponsors and local communities should work together to ensure that policy research and dialogue incorporates lessons learned from the various multi sectoral poverty reduction efforts being carried out at the local level.
- Sponsors and local communities should identify challenges and lessons learned specific to the various local conditions in the participating communities, including the nature of local leadership and the size and type of communities involved.

To ensure the continued growth and sustainability of the initiative:

- Sponsors should continue to explore additional sources of funding to ensure that additional communities may continue to strive to become Trail Builders.
- Sponsors and communities must continue to discuss the issue of demonstrating results to date, and more specifically the issue of performance measurement and evaluation of local results.
- Sponsors and communities should revisit the PCLC Membership Agreement to ensure that its purpose is clearly understood by all partners.
- Sponsors and communities should begin to develop strategies to ensure the long-term sustainability of local multi sectoral poverty reduction efforts beyond the Vibrant Communities timeframe.

Background to the Mid-Term Assessment

Purpose

The mid-term assessment of the Vibrant Communities initiative is the second of three reviews that the consulting firm of C.A.C. International has been asked to do on behalf of the sponsor organizations of Vibrant Communities. The mid-term assessment follows the preliminary assessment of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community (PCLC) carried out in the spring of 2003. A final assessment will be carried out in 2006.

The purpose of the mid-term assessment is to assist in the further development of the overall Vibrant Communities initiative, and particularly the Pan-Canadian Learning Community, by creating an opportunity for its members to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of its operations, and put forward recommendations for change.

Methodology

The first data collection step in the mid-term assessment was a detailed questionnaire sent out by e-mail to the 13 communities that are participating in Vibrant Communities. A fourteenth community that is no longer participating in the initiative was not sent a questionnaire. The Convenor Lead and a small group of core participants in each community were asked to collectively complete the questionnaire. In all, 12 communities completed the questionnaire; most of these were completed collectively, although in a few cases the convenor (or another leadership roundtable member when convenors were new) completed the survey alone. One community did not provide a response. Representatives from two of Vibrant Communities' sponsor organizations (Caledon and Tamarack) also completed this survey.¹

Based on the feedback received from this questionnaire, a preliminary draft of the mid-term assessment was prepared by C.A.C. International in January 2005 and distributed to the sponsor organizations and each of the participating communities.

The second data collection step of the mid-term assessment involved follow-up interviews with the Convenor Lead from each participating community (as well as the community that has withdrawn from the initiative) and with two representatives from each of the three Vibrant Communities sponsors. The purpose of these interviews was to discuss in greater detail the key issues that emerged from the initial questionnaire. The interviews also placed a greater emphasis on the overall model of the Vibrant Communities initiative and the relationships between the various partner organizations. Separate interview protocols were developed for three types of individuals, namely: 1) local convenors; 2) sponsor representatives directly involved in the daily operations of Vibrant Communities; and 3) other sponsors representatives.²

¹ A copy of this questionnaire is provided in Annex 5 of this report.

² Copies of these interview protocols are provided in Annexes 6 to 8 of this report.

In addition to these elements, the mid-term assessment also analyzed responses from a much shorter questionnaire distributed to five members of each community who have participated in some Learning Community activities (but who did not participate in the completion of the more detailed questionnaire). Only a very small number of questionnaires were received through this process (6 responses total). The analysis of these questionnaires was integrated into the overall assessment of the initiative's reach at the local level.³

Structure of the Mid-Term Assessment

This report is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of some of the key strengths of the PCLC, identifies some of the principal challenges encountered to date, and provides a statistical overview of the satisfaction of partner organizations with regards to the initiative as a whole, its various supports, and the level of learning acquired in various themes. Chapter 2 again focuses on the PCLC and explores in greater depth the key issues and challenges identified in Chapter 1.

Chapter 3 provides an assessment of the overall model of Vibrant Communities based on feedback received from local convenors and sponsor organizations. Strengths, limitations and lessons learned as they relate to the overall model are discussed. Chapter 4 discusses the relationships that exist between the various partner organizations within the initiative.

Chapter 5 briefly presents some of the key conclusions that emerge from the analyses of both the PCLC and the overall Vibrant Communities model, and offers some strategic recommendations for the future of the initiative.

In the annexes, more detailed summaries of the quantitative and qualitative responses relating to the specific PCLC supports and areas of learning acquired are provided, as well as a comparison between the perceptions of Trail Builder communities and non-Trail Builders. The analysis is presented as follows:

- Annex 1: Assessment of PCLC Supports; and
- Annex 2: Learning Acquired by PCLC Members and its Impact on their Local Work.
- Annex 3: Trail Builders versus non-Trail Builders – Statistical Comparison of Communities' Perceptions

³ A copy of this questionnaire is provided in Annex 9 of this report.

1 Overall Appreciation of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community (PCLC)

1.1 Key Strengths of the PCLC

The Quality of Information and Expertise

Local convenors and community members overwhelmingly acknowledge the high quality of expertise that has been made available through the PCLC. The information and analysis provided by sponsor organizations, coaches and other experts are viewed as significant strengths of the initiative, and important additions to the resources available to local groups. The various supports offered through the PCLC allow participating communities to gain a broader and deeper understanding of issues and strategies related to poverty reduction, while the various supports also provide an opportunity to seek out more detailed information in the areas of greatest interest. Community representatives appreciated the consistent growth in the number of supports and resources offered through the PCLC which have offered new opportunities for learning.

Overcoming Isolation and Sharing Experiences

Convenors and community members are also very appreciative of the opportunity to enter into contact with other individuals and groups across the country working on similar issues. This helps to “overcome the loneliness” often felt by those working at the front lines of poverty reduction and serves as a source of motivation and encouragement. Even more importantly, it offers the opportunity for communities to exchange experiences on work carried out to date and to learn from what others have accomplished. The majority of respondents also feel that they have the opportunity to provide feedback on the work being carried out through the PCLC, and deem the relationships with sponsor organizations to be highly collaborative and respectful.

The Relevance of Learning

Most respondents feel that the learning opportunities offered through the PCLC address important aspects of their work, and others note that the topics are generally timely and of increasing interest to their community. Events that offer the opportunity for peer-to-peer learning through the exchange and sharing of lessons learned between communities are deemed to be particularly useful, especially when they are carried out face-to-face.

The Impact of Learning on Local Work

Respondents provided various examples of how PCLC learning events and supports have impacted their local poverty reduction work. Some of the most common examples include:

- *The identification of community priorities and needs:* The various learning events have helped communities to focus on key issues and targeted groups at the local

level, as well as to gain a better understanding of the various dynamics surrounding poverty reduction efforts. Tools such as the Poverty Matrix have been deemed to be particularly helpful in this regard.

- *The formulation of comprehensive poverty reduction strategies:* The PCLC's various supports have provided direction and structure to local strategies, and helped to define specific action plans and steps to be taken during the implementation phase. For example, the frameworks discussed through the Sustainable Incomes Learning Initiative have been applied by a number of communities, while others have incorporated gender concepts into their work as a result of Vibrant Communities' Gender and Poverty Project.
- *The engagement of representatives from various social sectors in local poverty reduction work:* Communities have been particularly successful in engaging the non-profit sector and government agencies in their local work, while some have also been relatively successful in engaging business groups and low-income citizens (although progress has generally been quite uneven). The encouragement and guidance provided through the PCLC in this area are deemed to have been critical by many respondents.
- *Fundraising:* Some communities have led highly successful fundraising campaigns, integrating approaches discussed through the PCLC and using the support of their coaches. Two communities in particular highlighted campaigns that have raised nearly \$ 1 million.

A Growing Initiative

Community and sponsor representatives alike feel that the PCLC is gaining momentum as it evolves. Overall, interest and participation in learning events continues to grow and new partners continue to be added to local efforts. At the national level, the initiative continues to attract a great deal of interest and a growing involvement from various sectors. The website now receives over 7,000 hits per month, giving an indication of the growing visibility of the initiative.

1.2 Challenges Facing the PCLC

Although participating communities and sponsor organizations alike have a positive opinion of the overall functioning of the PCLC and the learning opportunities it offers, the PCLC faces a number of important challenges, including:

- Given the size and diversity of the PCLC, making learning events relevant to the specific needs and interests of the various participating communities is extremely difficult.
- Despite some successful cases of learning being directly applied to local work, the connection between the learning achieved through the PCLC and the front lines of poverty reduction work remains somewhat unclear for many community representatives.
- Most respondents feel that learning by telephone lacks intimacy, and participants show a clear preference for face-to-face learning.

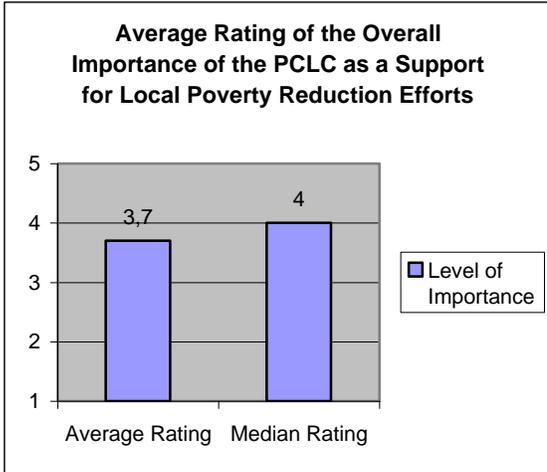
- Although the community input into the presentation of information during PCLC events is increasing, the leadership of the PCLC initiative is still perceived to be largely dominated by sponsor organizations.
- There is a growing desire among many sponsors and local representatives alike for the learning provided through the PCLC to reach a wider audience within participating communities, namely going beyond convenor leads and local working group members.
- The heavy time commitments placed on participating communities is a topic of concern. The majority of respondents underlined difficulties faced by their community in terms of their capacity to identify and take part in the PCLC learning opportunities of most interest.
- The linkages between participating communities are generally weak and restricted to the formal structures of the PCLC.

These are some of the key challenges facing the PCLC, and these were the primary topics explored in greater detail during the follow-up interviews with local convenors and sponsor organizations. Chapter 2 of this report offers a deeper analysis of these issues and identifies some of the proposed strategies to address them.

1.3 Overall Appreciation of the PCLC and its Supports - Statistical Summary

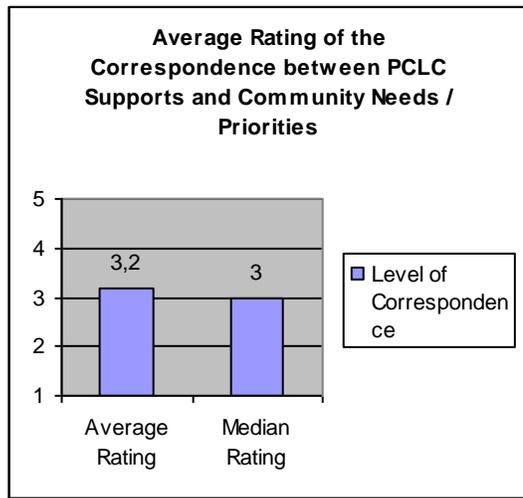
1.3.1 Overall Importance of the PCLC and its Links to Local Poverty Reduction Efforts

Respondents were asked to rate: 1) the overall importance of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community (PCLC) as a support for their local poverty reduction efforts; and 2) the extent to which the opportunities and supports offered through the PCLC correspond to the specific needs and priorities of their community. When several ratings were provided by members of the working groups, the ratings were averaged to arrive at a single figure per community. Ratings are on a scale of 1 to 5: 1 = Very low; 2 = Low; 3 = Moderate; 4 = High; 5=Very high.



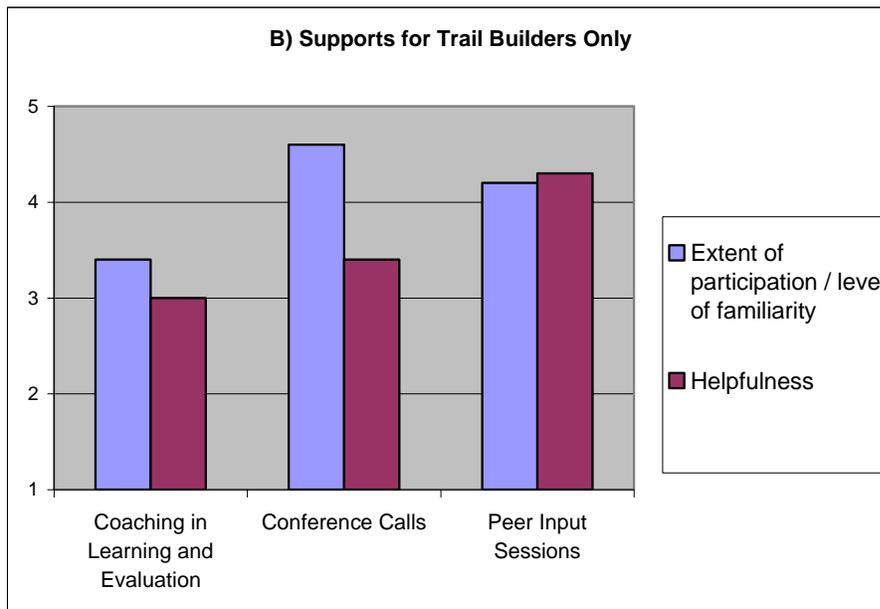
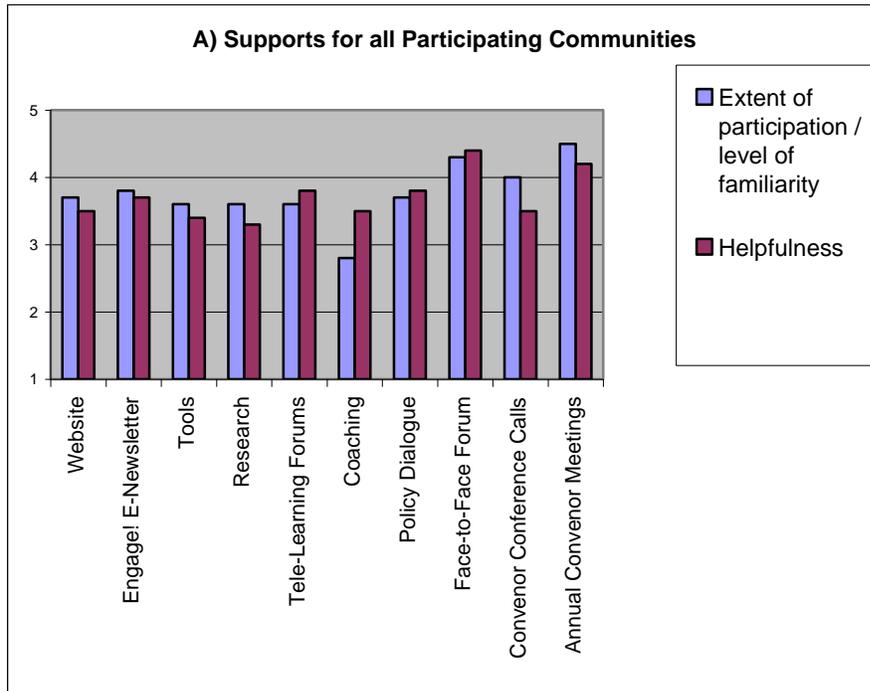
Notes on the statistics:
 13 respondents rated the overall importance of the PCLC, including one sponsor organisation.

Notes on the statistics:
 13 respondents rated the level of correspondence of the PCLC to the specific needs and priorities of their community, including one sponsor organisation.



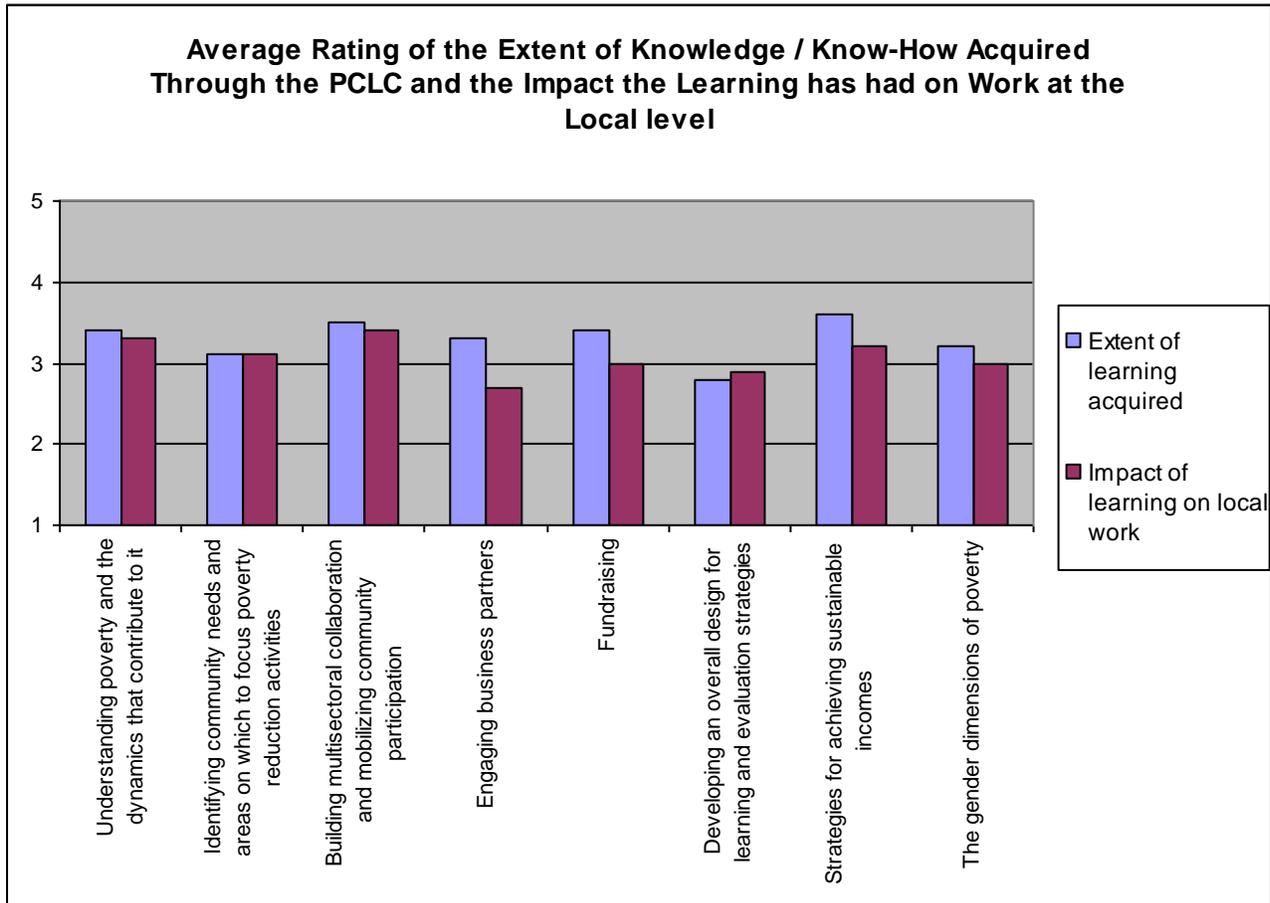
1.3.2 Average Ratings of PCLC Supports

For each of the PCLC supports listed below, respondents were asked to: (a) estimate the extent to which they had participated in or are familiar with the support; and (b) rate each support in terms of its helpfulness. Ratings are on a scale of 1 to 5: 1 = Very low; 2 = Low; 3 = Moderate; 4 = High; 5=Very high.



1.3.3 Average Ratings of Learning Acquired Through the PCLC

With regard to the each of the areas of learning listed below, respondents were asked to: (a) rate the extent of knowledge/know-how acquired by their community through the PCLC; and (b) rate the impact the learning has had on their work at the local level. Again, ratings are on a scale of 1 to 5: 1 = Very low; 2 = Low; 3 = Moderate; 4 = High; 5=Very high.



2 Key Issues for the Pan-Canadian Learning Community

2.1 Ensuring that Learning is Relevant to Participating Communities

Although community members and convenors generally feel that the initiative offers relevant and timely learning opportunities on themes of interest, there is an inherent difficulty faced by the initiative relating to the ability to organize learning events for a large number of participants with diverse local contexts. Indeed, a key challenge for the PCLC is to offer learning that is specific enough to make it meaningful for communities interested in the topics, yet general enough to ensure that as many communities as possible are engaged. One of the most important strategies for ensuring that learning themes are relevant is to offer participating communities the opportunity to contribute to the planning of learning themes and events. This section explores this issue in greater detail.

Opportunities for Community Input and Feedback

Sponsors and community organizations are generally in agreement that there are opportunities for communities to provide input into the planning of PCLC activities and events, including: input into the annual learning agenda, notably during the annual convenor forum; general feedback, comments and input provided during and after learning community events; and informal discussions between sponsors and community representatives.

The majority of convenors interviewed feel as though they are able to voice their opinions on the events organized through the PCLC and claim that they “feel heard” by the sponsors. Other convenors stressed that their lack of participation in planning was due to insufficient time or inadequate experience with the initiative on their part, as opposed to any structural barriers that may exist. Only a very small number of convenors felt that they were not offered adequate opportunities to provide input; these were generally communities with a very limited engagement in the initiative.

The Need for More Strategic Input

At the same time, many respondents – including both convenors and sponsor representatives – feel that the input provided by communities could be provided in a more effective and strategic way. With the exception of the annual convenor meeting, community input into planning has been done either after learning events are over, or in a highly informal and ad hoc manner. As a result, community input has not developed into clear strategies to guide future events or approaches. For their part, sponsor representatives underlined a desire to have communities engage in a more critical analysis and debate regarding the learning themes and processes of most interest, and to be more active in injecting new ideas into the PCLC process in order to foster a greater sense of ownership over the learning agenda.

Given the consensus over the need for more strategic community input into PCLC planning, sponsors and communities should discuss possible changes to the mechanisms currently in place, or explore the development of new planning approaches. One idea that emerged from the interviews was the establishment of small working groups of community leads charged with providing strategic direction to the design and content of learning events before they take place. Representation in such committees could rotate between the communities to ensure a broad participation and to promote a deeper engagement on the part of some less active communities. Communities could sign up for upcoming events based on the learning initiatives that are of most interest to them. Alternatively, communities could band together with others interested in common themes to propose new ideas to the PCLC membership as a whole.

Local Working Groups and Learning Plans

While local convenors generally feel as though they are able to offer input into planning, access for other local working group members is generally deemed minimal at best. However, there were again differences in the perceptions of the various communities. In communities where leadership in learning has been decentralized among a few key individuals or groups, local working group members have a greater opportunity to participate in planning than in others where learning is largely centred on the convenor.

There have also been concerns raised by sponsors over the fact that many convenors are providing input into PCLC planning without a formal local learning plan established with the participation of a broad range of individuals or groups. Indeed, if the direct participation of community members in the planning of PCLC learning is somewhat difficult to ensure, it becomes important to allow them to channel their input through the convenor or local lead. This dialogue should result in a clear learning strategy or plan for the local community. It is worth noting that the PCLC Membership Agreement calls for communities to “Establish a multi sectoral convening group” that: “Develops a strategy and work plan for a community ‘Learning Strategy’ to expand interest in community-based poverty reduction...”. This is a key aspect of the PCLC that has clearly been implemented more successfully in some communities than in others.

2.2 Ensuring that Learning is Practical and Applicable to Local Work

While most local communities are able to cite several examples of how learning acquired through the PCLC has impacted their local work, the majority of respondents have expressed some concern over the extent to which PCLC learning is directly applicable to the front lines of poverty reduction. Many local convenors and community members suggested the need for further thinking around strategies for making learning more practical. Some of these are discussed below.

A Shift Away from Theoretical Learning

Many local convenors and members of local working groups have felt that learning events and supports offered through the PCLC have been largely conceptual and academic in nature. For these respondents, the learning gained through the PCLC may be of value in and of itself to those that participate, but its application is very difficult. The learning may also be less relevant or accessible to other segments of the population. For example, some noted that business representatives in their communities have found that the use of “policy jargon” has hampered their understanding of the discussions, while low-income citizens have also found the discussions to be difficult to follow.

At the same time, the perception held by some of the PCLC as an “ivory tower” seems to be changing. Many community respondents have noticed a recent shift away from theoretical learning towards a new focus on specific measures to be taken by communities. Sponsors also acknowledge that much of earlier learning was centred around the discussion of poverty-related issues, whereas there has been a recent shift towards a focus on practice. Sponsors and community representatives alike view this shift to be an important step towards ensuring a greater relevance to and impact on work at the local level.

Peer-to-Peer Learning and a Focus on Community Experiences

The importance of peer-to-peer learning has often been underscored by the various partners in the initiative. Not only does it offer the opportunity to gain insight around what is happening around the country, it gives individual communities ideas as to what could work on a practical level within their local context. Peer-to-peer learning events have also offered the opportunity for communities to provide feedback to one another on their experiences and lessons learned.

Several communities also underlined the fact that there already exists a substantial amount of knowledge and expertise within their community on various topics addressed through the PCLC. This, combined with a concern that discussions and the presentation of material during PCLC events are often dominated by the sponsors, led several respondents to suggest that participating communities take a more active role in sharing their own knowledge and experiences through the PCLC. It was suggested that individual communities could host learning sessions or be more frequently charged with presenting material during tele-learning forums and other learning events. Respondents also felt that this could be a means to encourage a greater engagement from less active participants.

More specifically, community representative and sponsors are very enthusiastic over the use of ‘case studies’ and ‘community stories’ as a means to present and discuss learning themes and to explore the specific application of theories and concepts related to poverty reduction. Such discussions over ‘best practices’ and ‘lessons learned’ from past experiences are seen as critical to enabling communities to identify the most pertinent strategies and concrete steps for their own local situation. This type of learning has become more common through the PCLC, as learning events have allowed individual communities to discuss in detail their experience with a particular topic related to poverty

reduction. For example, the ‘community interview’ format during teleconferences has been increasingly used of late, and many would like to see the use of this format expanded further.

Sponsors expressed their intention to put specific community experiences at the forefront of various learning tools in the coming year. Tools will aim to document good practices at the local level based on lessons learned in the communities to date; research will emphasize specific poverty reduction strategies being implemented at the local level (particularly by Trail Builders); and policy work will address income security policies that are likely to be more relevant to local work.

Learning around Key Issues

Another key point relating to the relevance of learning is the importance of offering interrelated learning events that provide an in-depth analysis and approach to some key themes. Representatives of both sponsor and community organizations underlined the importance of this approach. This implies the integration of various learning elements into a unified whole, for example by combining research, conference calls, tele-learning forums, information on website, etc. around a specific theme, with reference to test cases in specific communities. This allows the learning to go to a deeper level and provides continuity to the initiative’s events.

Many communities deemed the learning around specific integrated initiatives to be particularly helpful. For example, the series on living wage was seen as having offered some of the most useful learning opportunities to date. The learning is multi-dimensional and is delivered in several steps; from issue definition and strategic approaches to practical steps for implementing specific initiatives.

Follow-up on Key Issues and ‘Closing the Loop’ of Learning

Related to an integrated learning approach around key themes is the issue of follow-up after learning events have been completed. Many community representatives expressed a desire for more discussion around how different participants have put into action the learning gained; i.e., “who has done what and how” based on the learning, with what kind of results and lessons learned from the experience. Some respondents gave the specific examples of engaging the business and low-income sectors as areas in which they would like to participate in follow-up discussions on the successes / failures of the different communities. Others suggested that the follow-up be taken a step further, through the identification of future learning initiatives based on the lessons learned from the implementation process.

Another important step is the transformation of learning obtained into broader conclusions at the policy level. Part of this is what one sponsor representative referred to as “closing the loop of learning” by *creating a body of knowledge* around the learning that has been gained. This body of knowledge can be shared with other communities around the country, and can be used as a basis for research, advocacy and policy dialogue at the national level.

The Importance of Coaching

Many communities, particularly Trail Builders, feel that the coaching support has been the single most important form of support offered through the PCLC, notably as it relates to the transfer of learning into specific steps to implement poverty reduction strategies. Respondents stressed the high level of expertise of the PCLC coaches and the quality of the guidance offered in applying principles to the local context. Many convenors also expressed their appreciation of their coach's availability, responsiveness, openness and commitment to the community.

At the same time, there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the coaching support. Many communities are unaware as to whether or not they have a coach, or as to how they would go about getting in touch with them. Several communities, including one Trail Builder, affirm that they do not have access to a coach. At the same time, some sponsor organizations expressed surprise over the fact that the coaches have not been used as much as expected.

Given the great deal of confusion and uncertainty surrounding this aspect of the PCLC, there is an obvious need for sponsor organizations to clarify and explain the nature of this support to participating communities, and particularly the processes through which it may be accessed. In the case of communities that have not been assigned a coach, it seems important to explore the identification of a coach as soon as possible to ensure that communities receive the hands-on guidance that is deemed so critical to local work. For some communities that have been experiencing difficulties implementing their local strategy and applying learning acquired through the PCLC, the support of a coach may foster a greater engagement in the initiative.

2.3 Managing Learning within Participating Communities

The heavy time commitment that membership in the PCLC involves for participating communities has been a topic of some concern since the beginning of the initiative, and was again underlined in the questionnaire responses and interviews. The majority of respondents expressed difficulties experienced by their community in terms of their capacity to take part in the various activities organized through the PCLC.

This theme touches on a number of key issues, including the capacity of communities to identify supports of most interest, the streamlining of current events, the need to stay realistic in terms of the events organized, the role of local convenors, and the extent to which convenors have decentralized local leadership.

Identifying the Learning Events and Supports of Most Interest

Some communities are still trying to understand all the various facets of the initiative and the types of supports offered. One respondent suggested that information on the PCLC for new members be packaged in an accessible and synthesized manner, since the number of PCLC resources is “somewhat daunting for less initiated individuals”.

At the same time, many communities have identified some improvements in terms of their ability to identify and access the learning opportunities that are of most interest. Much of this is the result of a greater focus within the community itself on key areas, which in turn allows them to select the learning supports accordingly. A few respondents commended the sponsors on an improvement in the communication through the initiative regarding the various resources and events organized. The information disseminated was deemed to be better organized and of better quality, thereby enriching their community’s experience. Sponsors noted that specific efforts have been made to ensure that communities are aware of the available supports and have advance notice of various events so that they can plan to participate in those that are of interest. The reorganization of the Vibrant Communities website has also aimed to make materials easier to access.⁴

Maximizing the Efficiency of PCLC events

Several respondents suggested that some learning events could be better streamlined to ensure a more efficient use of time. For example, some noted that tele-learning forums normally take a while to get going with a lot of small talk and logistical details at the beginning. Since many participants have very limited time available to them, the need to be more efficient was stressed. Other suggestions include keeping administrative details and community updates to a minimum during conference calls in order to shorten calls and to allow more space for case study discussions.

Slowing Down and Staying Realistic

Despite efforts to make the PCLC more efficient, many communities still feel overwhelmed by the amount of resources and events offered through the PCLC, as well as the sheer amount of information generated through the initiative. Several respondents suggested a need to “slow down a little”. A number of respondents, including some sponsor representatives, feel that communities may be getting too much information and pressure from the initiative given their limited resources. Some suggest that fewer events be organized with more time between them, thereby offering opportunities for greater follow-up and consolidation of the learning achieved before moving on to new events.

The Role of Local Convenor

Although all communities have struggled to some extent with the management of their participation in the initiative, it is clear that some communities have been much more

⁴ A full list of the changes made to the PCLC supports since the Preliminary Assessment is provided in Annex 4.

successful than others in terms ensuring a consistent engagement in learning events and easing the burden on local leaders.

One key factor that has impacted communities' abilities to engage consistently in the PCLC is the role of the local convenor and the extent to which the responsibility for participating in the PCLC has rested on her/his shoulders. Since the convenors are generally leading figures in existing local poverty reduction efforts, their working schedules are full and the time available to devote to the PCLC is often limited. Still, in a number of communities the local involvement in learning is highly concentrated in the hands of the convenor, and in some cases there are essentially no other individuals with leadership roles or responsibilities within the initiative. In these cases, convenors generally feel overwhelmed by the time commitments required to participate in the PCLC.

In other communities there have been active local working groups or leadership roundtables established, through which participation and leadership in PCLC events is shared and often rotated among a handful of key individuals. A number of communities have also identified local 'Learning Leads' that are responsible for coordinating the community's participation in learning events and for disseminating learning to members of the local working group. Local communities may also identify different learning leads for specific events or themes. In these communities, local convenors feel much less burdened by the initiative, and a consistent participation in PCLC events is much easier to ensure.

Decentralizing Leadership at the Community Level

Sponsor organizations expressed concern over the fact that many local convenors are taking on too much. This has placed excessive pressure on their availability and compromised the engagement of their community, which has in turn impeded the learning from reaching a broader range of sectors. The need for local convenors to identify and engage at the very least a small group of key individuals to take on greater leadership roles was frequently underscored. It should be noted that the appointment of local 'Learning Leads' for PCLC themes is an integral part of the PCLC Community Agreement.

Although few would dispute the importance of decentralizing leadership, some local convenors have been much more successful than others in bringing in other individuals. In roughly half the communities, the convenors have successfully mobilized a team of local representatives from within their own organization or from other organizations that have specific roles and responsibilities within the initiative. In several communities, convenors can count on the leadership of up to three or four other individuals, as well as the frequent participation of members of the local roundtable which involves up to 15 people in some cases. In some communities, there isn't a single lead organization or individual, but instead a coalition of two or three that share the responsibilities for taking the lead on different aspects or events.

In approximately the other half of communities, local convenors claim that they have had relatively limited success in bringing in other individuals to take on leadership roles

within the initiative. In many of these communities, the local convenors admit that they need to invest more time and effort into reaching out to other groups and encouraging a greater participation from members of the local community. Most expressed an intention to be more active in the future.

At the same time, several convenors claimed that they had approached other organizations or individuals in their community, with very little success. Many organizations simply have too much on their plates, and prefer to remain marginally engaged in the initiative rather than taking on a leadership role. Others simply aren't interested enough in the initiative to become more engaged. Some convenors have also underlined difficulties in delegating responsibilities to others. In some cases the convenor has been the only individual closely involved from the beginning, and it has been difficult to transfer their understanding to others as they become further involved. Many community members feel overwhelmed or even intimidated by the initiative, whereas others may not understand the nature of the initiative or what is expected of them as members of a core working group.

Given the importance of a local convening group, this aspect of the initiative must continue to be a key focus of local convenor's efforts. The local convening group is important for the day to day management of the initiative, but it is also critical to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the progress made through the establishment of a permanent structure that coordinates and monitors local work. In communities where there does not exist such as group, it seems important that local convenors, with the help of coaches and sponsors, renew and deepen their efforts to ensure that such a group is established.

One specific suggestion put forth by some local convenors is to allow convenors to bring along one or two other individual(s) from their community to attend the annual face-to-face convenor meetings. This would offer an opportunity for these individuals to gain a deeper insight into the initiative, to meet representatives from other communities, as well as to provide input into the initiative's planning. In turn, these individuals will be more likely to remain engaged once they return to their local work.

The Varying Capacities of Participating Communities

A key factor that has influenced the management of learning at the local level has been the extent to which the local convenor could draw upon existing resources and capacities. In some communities, the convenor is affiliated with an organization that has a variety of multi sectoral partnerships. As a result, the mobilization of resources and leadership for the PCLC has been much easier, which has in turn brought a broader cross-section of actors to the learning initiatives and offered important support to the local convenor. In a few cases, communities had already created a multi sectoral working group around poverty reduction issues before the PCLC, therefore a supportive infrastructure was already in place.

In other communities, the local convenor was essentially starting from square one in their attempt to create multi sectoral partnerships around learning for poverty reduction. Very

few contacts or relations existed with other local groups, and internal financial resources were highly limited. As a result, mobilizing leaders for learning has been very difficult.

2.4 The Dissemination of Learning at the Local Level

There is a general consensus that learning through the PCLC has traditionally been focused on the local convenor and the local working group in each community. Increasingly however, there is a desire among sponsors and some community representatives to see learning disseminated to a larger number of individuals and groups within the participating communities. In particular, the importance of ensuring that learning reaches a broad cross-section of local actors from various sectors (business and government representatives, low-income residents, disabled persons, labour groups, etc.) has been highlighted. One sponsor has identified a specific objective of reaching over 100 people in each community at least twice a year through learning events and activities.

Learning for a Broader Audience

There are two principal mechanisms through which the participation of a wider segment of the local participation in learning may be explored. The first is to expand PCLC events to ensure that a higher number of participants take part across the country. In each community, local convenors and leads would work to ensure a high level of local participation. To date, this is the direction in which the PCLC appears to be heading. Some suggested strategies for this approach include the need to better ‘package’ events by providing more advance notice prior to events, and to provide more attractive and informative background material to raise interest within the general community. Several convenors and community members have also suggested the need to ensure that the discussions are free of “conceptual or academic jargon” so that the terminology is more accessible to a broader group.

A second approach is to provide support to local convenors and leads for the dissemination and transfer of learning acquired through the PCLC at the local level. Several convenors highlighted the importance of transmitting knowledge and learning within the community by re-packaging it and making it accessible and directly relevant to their communities. The use of specific mechanisms to funnel learning was discussed, including the organization of local learning workshops and events in each community. In addition to promoting learning at the local level, such events could raise awareness and understanding of the initiative. Some convenors have also expressed a desire to develop partnerships with educational institutions such as universities and colleges to disseminate learning within the broader community.

Some communities are already actively exploring ways to ensure a greater local involvement in learning and to bring learning closer to local work. For example, following national learning events some community leads traditionally organize local strategy discussions to explore ways in which the ideas discussed may apply to their specific context.

A Bilingual PCLC?

The PCLC now includes two communities based in Québec, where the vast majority of individuals involved in the local initiatives have a limited working knowledge of English. These communities have highlighted the fact that their capacities to participate meaningfully in PCLC events and to develop stronger linkages with other communities are limited as a result of the language barrier. Most of their participation is therefore left in the hands of a small number of people who are able to work effectively in English. The PCLC has recently experimented with offering translation services during its events, an addition that was greatly appreciated by francophone respondents. Responses received suggest that the consistent translation of documents, tools and “live” events into French could be a means to ensure a broader engagement of these communities.

2.5 Deepening Relations between Participating Communities

For many community representatives, the opportunity to deepen relationships with counterparts across the country and to gain a greater understanding of what is being done in other regions is one of the primary reasons for their participation in the PCLC. Some respondents noted that there is currently a good sharing of information, that cordial and supportive relationships have been created with a number of other communities, and that the relationships are deepening over time as community representatives gain a better understanding of what others are doing.

However, nearly every community representative and sponsor noted that the relations between the participating communities should be stronger than they currently are, and that more needs to be done to deepen the linkages. In most cases, the communications between communities are limited to exchanges through the formal structures of the PCLC, and often don't go much beyond a very general awareness of what other communities are working on. The questionnaire responses also demonstrated that the linkages between communities are limited to the convenors and are virtually non-existent between other community members in the various locations.

There are some exceptions to the generally weak relations that exist. Some convenors knew each other from previous work, and therefore already have a good understanding of what others are focusing on. As several convening organizations are affiliated to the United Way, this has created a natural linkage between some communities. Through the PCLC itself, some communities have developed links with one or two other communities that are either close by geographically or that are facing similar challenges in their local work; relations have consisted of phone calls and occasional visits. Among the Trail Builders, there have also been many more opportunities to develop linkages through specific events, and as a result the Trail Builders generally feel much closer to each other than to other members of the PCLC.

Strategies for Deepening Relations between Communities

Sponsors and participating communities alike have underlined the importance of doing more to foster stronger inter-community relations. A number of possible strategies have been suggested, and are discussed below.

More Face-to-Face Meetings

The impersonal nature of telephone interaction was identified as an important barrier to deepening inter-community relations by the majority of respondents. All individuals involved in the initiative agree that learning supports are most effective when they are carried out face-to-face. It is significant to note that the Face-to-Face Forum and the Annual Convenor Meetings had the highest ‘helpfulness’ ratings of the supports offered to all participating communities. Several respondents stressed that the members of their community that had participated in face-to-face forums were generally much more motivated to participate in the PCLC and to keep up contacts with other communities. Nearly every respondent expressed a desire for more frequent face-to-face meetings, although all were sensitive to the high cost of such meetings and the limited resources available to the initiative. One suggestion mentioned earlier is that one or two additional community members be invited to the annual convenor meetings. Some also suggested that the use of video conferencing be explored so that participants may at least recognize each other and subsequently feel a closer bond with the rest of the group.

Information on Other Communities

A number of local convenors stressed the need for more information on the activities being undertaken by other communities; this is seen as a way to foster a natural desire to exchange more. Some suggested that a list of the various individuals involved in the initiative in each community be distributed, with a general overview of their roles and the organizational structure of their initiative. Although there is general information available on the website on what each community is doing, several respondents requested that more detailed information on each community be made available.

Encouragement from national sponsors

As mentioned earlier, most of the inter-community relations are restricted to the formal mechanisms of Vibrant Communities, and very little informal contact exists. Indeed, there appears to be a certain overdependence on sponsors to bring the various actors together. Some convenors admitted that they felt uncomfortable contacting other convenors directly, or expressed uncertainty over what mechanisms were available to pursue relations with other communities. It appears important that sponsor organizations provide more encouragement to local communities to develop informal contact between themselves, or at least make it clear that that informal linkages are a critical element of a successful initiative.

Mentoring

Several local convenors also suggested that mentoring be explored as a possible means to build closer linkages between communities, in addition to offering timely support to communities that are facing many challenges at the local level. It was suggested that communities who are further along (i.e. Trail Builders) could offer guidance and advice based on their experiences to date to other PCLC members, possibly through the creation of individual partnerships. Although there is some general support for this idea, there is some concern over the availability of the potential mentors to carry out this type of work.

The Establishment of Sub-Groups or Learning Clusters

One of the most popular ideas to emerge from the discussion around inter-community relations was the establishment of smaller sub-groups of participating communities. This approach would serve to develop stronger bonds between specific communities and to allow for more detailed discussion on specific issues that are of most interest to the communities. Given the inherent difficulty of identifying learning opportunities that are relevant to the full PCLC membership, the use of sub-groups is seen by many respondents as a way to make the initiative more practical or relevant to the local context. It was also viewed as a means to allow for more informal discussions giving each community more time to express themselves.

Sub-groups or learning clusters could be established based on a number of criteria including geographical location, learning themes of interest, type of community, and phase of activity within Vibrant Communities. These different approaches are briefly discussed below.

Geographical Linkages: A number of local convenors expressed a desire for the creation of stronger linkages with communities that are located nearby. This would allow for more face-to-face meetings or site visits, which would serve to deepen mutual understanding and offer the opportunity to get more individuals from the local communities involved. Particularly in the case of communities that are located in the same province, it was felt that the similar challenges and issues surrounding their work (legislation, government actors, etc.) create a good potential for partnership.

Several local convenors suggested that regional groups be created along a Western, Central and Atlantic Canada breakdown. This approach could be facilitated using Tamarack's three Convenor Leads whose responsibilities are also divided by region. Regional face-to-face meetings could be organized one or twice a year, with a team of individuals invited from each community to participate. The regional approach was discussed during the last annual convenor meeting, but little follow-up action has been taken to date.

Another suggestion was to develop linkages with only one or possibly two other communities close by to discuss in greater detail the challenges faced by each and to promote a deeper partnership. This is already happening to some extent in a few cases, but

could be explored further by identifying a specific organizational partner for each community.

A final suggestion relating to geographical linkages was to encourage deeper relations between francophone communities and participants. This would obviously involve community members in Trois-Rivières and St-Michel (Montréal), but could also draw from francophone populations in other communities outside of Québec, particularly in Ontario and New Brunswick.

Thematic Linkages: Many respondents suggested that the establishment of sub-groups around specific learning themes would be the most pertinent approach. Depending on the learning issues that are of greatest interest or direct relevance to their work, communities could establish learning clusters to analyse the issues in greater depth. This would ensure that learning is specifically focused on the needs of the various communities, and the smaller groups would ensure that communities have more opportunity to lead learning events and to engage in more detailed discussions.

Community Size: Somewhat related to the thematic linkages approach is a breakdown of sub-groups according to the size of the community initiatives. Proponents of this approach argue that, for example, communities operating on a neighbourhood level have much more in common with others of the same size than with larger regional initiatives that may span across several municipalities. In some cases this type of distinction has already created natural linkages between some participating communities and partnerships have begun to form.

Phase of Operations in Vibrant Communities: Another approach that has already been explored through the PCLC is the development of linkages between communities at similar stages in their involvement with Vibrant Communities. This has been done for the Trail Builders through peer input sessions and convenor calls. There is a strong desire for more Trail Builder-specific learning events in order to discuss in greater detail the approaches being undertaken in the various communities and the lessons learned from these experiences.

Beyond the Trail Builders, a number of respondents stressed that Phase II of Vibrant Communities is a particularly challenging one, as communities must develop a comprehensive plan without having access to a significant amount of additional financial resources through the initiative. Several convenors suggested that more support is needed for communities in this situation, and some specific learning events could be organized to discuss the various challenges presented by this phase.

The Downside of Sub-Groups and Learning Clusters

Although there is generally strong support for the idea of establishing sub-groups, there are three primary concerns that have been raised over this approach. A first concern relates to the additional financial resources necessary to organize such events, and a second concern is that they will add to the workload of participating communities by introducing additional commitments. To address these particular concerns, the possibility

of reducing the number of full national events in order to make room for other smaller events could be envisioned, as well as the transfer of some resources from national to sub-group activities. However, this leads to the third concern, namely that sub-groups could “unglue the national family” that the PCLC represents.

The Need for Experimentation?

Despite the concerns expressed above, there exists sufficient interest and rationale to justify an exploration of new mechanisms to foster deepened relationships between communities. There seems to be a consensus that this would be an important step towards ensuring that learning be as relevant as possible to local communities, and that a broader group of local members be mobilized to participate in the initiative. Sponsor organizations and local convenors should discuss the possibilities that the various approaches represent, and experiment with new approaches as the initiative progresses.

3 Assessment of the Vibrant Communities Model

The overall model of Vibrant Communities represents a new and innovative approach to poverty reduction. The initiative is active at a number of different levels involving a variety of partners with distinct roles and responsibilities. The three sponsors each bring their own expertise to the model and focus on different elements of its work: The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is the primary source of funding for the initiative and is charged with promoting the initiative to other funders in Canada and sharing lessons learned from its various poverty reduction initiatives; the Caledon Institute of Social Policy is primarily focused on the policy dialogue, research and evaluation components of the initiative; and Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement coordinates most learning activities and offers various capacity building supports to local communities. These three sponsor organizations work in partnership with 13 local communities (previously 14 but one community withdrew from the initiative) located in eight provinces across the country. Six of these communities have now moved on to the Trail Builder phase of the initiative during which a multi sectoral poverty reduction initiative is implemented at the local level.

Sponsor organizations underlined the fact that the model aims to be as flexible as possible in its approach to poverty reduction. The goal is to ensure that the model is dynamic and that it can move in directions that are responsive to community needs and capacities. In this sense, the model “is not a cookie cutter”, but rather a dynamic and flexible movement that can be pursued down a variety of different paths.

3.1 Strengths of the Vibrant Communities Model

An important strength of the initiative, and one way in which it represents an innovative approach, is the creation of partnerships between a wide range of local and national actors that rarely have the opportunity to work together. At the local level, the initiative seeks to bring in a variety of sectors including the business community and low-income residents and unite their efforts for a common objective. As several respondents noted, these are segments of the population that often have opposing views on various socioeconomic issues. At the national level, the model offers the opportunity for local communities to dialogue with national policy makers, an opportunity that is very rare for those working at the front lines of local poverty reduction efforts. By using these types of approaches, Vibrant Communities is more than a simple program or initiative; it is a *movement* focused on creating systemic change. Sponsors and community representatives feel as though they are part of a “special”, “courageous” and “highly significant” effort.

As alluded to earlier, the initiative offers a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between policy making at the national level and poverty reduction work at the local level. For national policy practitioners, the model offers the opportunity to gain direct insight into what is being attempted at the front lines of poverty reduction, and what the lessons taken

from these experiences have been. This further strengthens their understanding of key issues and serves to ground their policy work in hands-on practical experience. Meanwhile, the model offers the opportunity for those working at the community level to gain a broader conceptual understanding of key issues, and to gain exposure to new thinking and approaches to poverty reduction that could be explored at the local level. These two mutually reinforcing processes are continuously taking place, thereby creating a powerful and constantly evolving body of collective knowledge and understanding on poverty reduction.

Another related strength identified by various community and sponsor representatives is the fact that Vibrant Communities has integrated into its structure a mechanism through which policy can be articulated and disseminated. Since one of the sponsors is a well-respected national policy institution, the initiative has its own powerful channel through which information and thinking on the outcomes of the initiative can be shared in order to contribute to systemic and sustainable change at the national level. Overall, sponsors (and some convenors) are very enthusiastic about the policy component of the initiative which has generally gone further than expected. It has included the preparation of eight policy papers and the organization of various policy dialogue events with a strong representation of various sectors. The Vibrant Communities experience has also been used as a model for other work being undertaken by sponsor organizations in local communities, while several government agencies are using Vibrant Communities as a training case study relating to government / community collaboration.

The model also gives a greater level of visibility to the work being carried out by the various partners. Since the initiative is truly of a pan-Canadian nature, it represents an attractive image that has generated a good deal of interest at the national level. For local communities, their association with a national movement like Vibrant Communities is a source of credibility and validation for their local work, which in turn helps to identify local partners and funding sources.

The overall leadership of the initiative is overwhelmingly viewed to be a key strength of the initiative by participating communities. The sponsors are seen as strong, dedicated leaders that successfully challenge and motivate participating communities. At the same time, most respondents feel that sponsors don't impose their own agenda on the initiative and genuinely want communities to take an active role in its continuing development.

Several convenors and community members also underscored the fact that the model is an open, welcoming and respectful environment which allows people from a variety of backgrounds to feel comfortable within its activities and structures. Some expressed appreciation for the fact that the issue of living in poverty is treated in a highly respectful way, and that there is a genuine effort to include individuals that are living in poverty within the work. Vibrant Communities' efforts to give a voice to those that are affected by policies are deemed to set it apart from most other nationally-led poverty reduction initiatives.

3.2 Limitations of the Vibrant Communities Model

Sponsor and community representatives share the sentiment that Vibrant Communities has tremendous potential and benefits from a quality group of organizations and individuals that are highly committed to their work. As such, sponsor organizations feel that the initiative should be able to accomplish a great deal, and in some cases they feel that the initiative is moving along slower than they had hoped.

A number of convenors and community members, as well as a few sponsor representatives, feel that the expectations may have been somewhat unrealistic in terms of where the communities would be in the development and implementation of their multi sectoral poverty reduction plans. Local convenors in particular underscored the fact that the relatively limited resources available through the initiative (particularly for communities in phases I and II), in addition to the lack of additional resources at the local level, have generally compromised the ability of communities to progress further in their local initiatives. Sponsors pointed out that some communities have very little experience building multi sectoral collaboration, and that the initiative symbolised a new approach that has been slow to get started. Given the limited progress in a number of cases, some convenors and community respondents feel that the overall model has not yet provided direct benefits to people living in poverty.

Although some view the flexibility of the model as a key strength, a small number of community respondents noted that the structure of the initiative may not allow for the exploration of the issues of most interest to them. In the case of one community, the multi sectoral nature of the local Trail Builder leadership model proved to be incompatible with the community's established decision-making structures, eventually leading to the community's decision to withdraw from the initiative.

A more specific limitation of the model identified by one local convenor was the difficulty they had explaining the model and the structure of the initiative to potential partners. In particular, they were unsure to whom potential partners should be referred in terms of a formal coordinating body of the overall initiative. They suggest that additional thought be given as to how the Vibrant Communities organic model should be defined and how the initiative should be "branded" so that it is more easily understood.

Some of the challenges discussed earlier as they related to the work of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community are also relevant to the overall model of Vibrant Communities. A small number of respondents felt that the leadership of the initiative remains concentrated in the hands of the sponsors, and that there is a need to foster a greater ownership and responsibility for the initiative within the participating communities. Again, many convenors also identified the encroachment of the initiative on the time of those working at the local level. The many demands of the initiative can become a heavy burden on local leaders, even when they have successfully decentralized leadership. Some Trail Builders also expressed some concern over the "balancing act" needed to determine how much time and/or resources should be focused on the local initiative versus the PCLC.

3.3 Lessons Learned from the Vibrant Communities Model

The Need for Patience

A number of convenors, in addition to some sponsors, stressed that everyone involved in Vibrant Communities must remain patient and not expect results to happen too fast. Some suggested that instead of multiplying the number of initiatives and types of supports offered, more efforts should be made to solidify the progress achieved to date and to ensure that communities are making the most out of the initiative's basic supports. Some convenors have also suggested that the initiative may underestimate the difficulty of getting the various sectors of their community to share similar visions of key socioeconomic issues. For example, issues such as minimum wage are inherently divisive, and ideological divides exist between sectors such as the business community and low-income citizens. As a result, broad collaboration is an exceptionally challenging approach that requires a great deal of time, effort and support.

Several local convenors expressed some frustration over the fact that they were not able to live up to the expectations of the initiative's leaders, and many felt as though they were "letting others down" by not advancing more rapidly. In some cases, this feeling of inadequacy seems to have led some communities to feel overwhelmed by the initiative, and eventually caused them to become less engaged.

An Initiative Better Suited to Some Communities than Others?

Regarding the varying levels of progress achieved by participating communities, there are several explanations that have been put forth. As mentioned earlier, some communities benefited from existing networks and partnerships to quickly mobilize support around a collaborative poverty reduction strategy, while others are still struggling to identify and engage potential partners. Some also feel that the type of leadership exercised by the local convenors and working group members is key – some leaders tend to take more on themselves while others tend to delegate. In an initiative such as Vibrant Communities where collaboration is a driving force for progress, leaders that work in greater isolation may have a more difficult time moving ahead.

A number of respondents also suggested that the initiative may be better geared to certain types of communities than others, although the views on this issue vary significantly. Some convenors working in smaller communities (i.e. neighbourhood level) lament the lack of resources at their disposal compared to communities that are operating at a city-wide or regional level. At the same time, some convenors working at a broader level feel that building multi-sector collaboration would be easier if concentrated in a smaller area where linkages between various actors are easier to establish. The number of other locally-led initiatives that are ongoing in the community may also have an impact on the success of the initiative. In some cases, local leaders have found it challenging to build linkages other multi sectoral efforts undertaken in relation to specific themes in their community (i.e. homelessness, etc.). In the case of one community, the local convenor felt

that the growth of and interest in their local initiative had been compromised by the presence of other similar multi sectoral poverty reduction efforts being undertaken in their city.

Giving the widely varying experiences to date in the various communities, there seems to be a need for sponsor organizations and participating communities to “take stock” of the experience to date and to attempt to identify some lessons learned specific to the various challenges that exist depending on the size and type of community involved.

Policy Dialogue

Although the policy dialogue is generally viewed as an important success of the initiative to date, some important lessons learned from the experience have been identified. Sponsors generally feel that the early policy dialogue discussions may have been more useful had they first addressed the specific realities faced by government actors as opposed to bringing together both government and local actors. Since the initiative is an innovative model, its incorporation into government’s internal procedures and agendas is somewhat challenging. Once some key concerns had been addressed with government, then the policy could have focused on local needs, before finally bringing the two levels together. As it was, some felt that the policy dialogue between communities and government was premature and less dynamic than anticipated.

Financial Resources

The overwhelming majority of local convenors feel that the resources offered through Vibrant Communities for Phases I and II are not sufficient to ensure a consistent engagement of their communities in the initiative. Indeed, all communities have had to mobilize resources of their own to ensure adequate leadership and participation in the PCLC.

Several community members or convenors have suggested that an effective and manageable community participation in the PCLC would require the funding of a full-time (or at least a part-time) position to coordinate learning and to disseminate information within the community. Since the financial support offered to communities in phases I or II or the Vibrant Communities initiative is quite limited (\$5,000 and \$20,000 respectively) communities must generally draw from their own existing resources to ensure their participation. Some local partners are more equipped to do so than others, resulting in widely varying levels of engagement.

Many respondents feel that the issue of resources is a particularly pressing one for communities in Phase II of the initiative. These communities have received only a one-time \$20,000 grant, yet there are significant demands on these communities that are striving to become Trail Builders; namely organizing, planning and fundraising for their collaborative initiative, while also participating in the PCLC events. Many communities that are now Trail Builders felt that this was the most difficult part of the initiative for their local community, and many were surprised by amount of time, support and resources needed to complete this phase. Once communities have reached Phase III, the funding

allocated through Vibrant Communities increases significantly thereby taking much of the pressure off local leaders.

For the sponsor organizations, the initiative also requires a tremendous amount of work. Those directly involved in Vibrant Communities estimate that the time they spend working on the initiative goes far beyond what was expected or generally planned for. Some sponsors feel that they require additional staff resources to provide a greater support to participating communities and to establish deeper relations with the various partners.

The Number of Participating Communities

One of the few topics on which there has been a significant divergence of viewpoints among sponsoring organizations relates to the ideal number of communities participating in the initiative. Some sponsor representatives were initially supportive of a smaller-scale approach that would have started with only two or three communities before expanding to a total of between five and ten. Others would like to see the initiative bigger than it is now, with 20 or more communities taking part in the PCLC.

The advantages of having a larger group relate to some of the strengths of the initiative discussed earlier, such as having a truly pan-Canadian involvement and a greater diversity among the various communities participating. It also helps to mitigate the risks faced by the initiative should some communities falter in their work. With a greater number of communities, a critical mass for learning events is generally ensured, and the initiative offers more local test cases to deepen knowledge and understanding around collaborative poverty reduction strategies.

At the same time, the large number of communities presents a number of challenges. As discussed earlier, the diversity of communities' priorities and situations makes it extremely difficult to ensure that learning topics and events are of direct relevance to the communities. Further, the strength of the working relationship between sponsor organization and the participating communities, as well as between the participating communities themselves, generally suffers as the group becomes larger.

Trail Builders versus non-Trail Builders

The Vibrant Community model includes two primary types of communities: the Trail Builders and the non-Trail Builders. When the initiative began, the identity of the Trail Builder communities was not known; they would be identified through a "natural process" through which some communities showed themselves to be better positioned to move into the implementation phase.

For those that have graduated to the Trail Builder phase, their involvement in the initiative has taken on a very different dimension. For some, Trail Builder status and implementation "has launched a machine"; it is no longer just a concept or a model, but is now a series of specific initiatives that are having an impact in the community. Trail Builder status has meant an important level of visibility for convening organizations that has opened the eyes of corporate sponsors and helped to mobilize other partners at the

local level. The significant increase in financial resources available through the initiative (and through communities' own fundraising activities to match the funding offered) also takes a great deal of pressure off the local resources.

Since the level of resources currently available through the initiative has placed a limit on the number of communities that can become Trail Builders (recently growing from four to six), there is some question as to the effect this has had on the other communities. Overall, it seems clear that the engagement of the non-Trail Builders, as demonstrated in their involvement in learning events and the establishment of active local working groups, is generally lower than that of Trail Builders. Indeed, the responses to the mid-term assessment questionnaire suggest that Trail Builder communities generally view the PCLC to be more important to their local work than non Trail Builders.⁵ If the possibility of becoming a Trail Builder is perceived to have been taken off the table, one can certainly wonder how this will affect other participating communities.

At the same time, the Trail Builder selection process is one of natural evolution; some communities have demonstrated the capacity and the interest to move to the next level while others have not. It seems normal to expect that those ready and most interested in moving on have generally been more engaged overall in the initiative. The initiative has also shown a good deal of flexibility in accommodating two new Trail Builders in the past few months given the progress these communities had made. Indeed, the demonstration of this type of flexibility is important to motivate communities with their sights set on Phase III. It must also be mentioned that the primary funders of Vibrant Communities are open to the idea of expanding the number of Trail Builder communities in the years to come.

The Engagement of Participating Communities

In a number of communities the local participation has been much lower than anticipated. Despite some of the concerns surrounding the applicability of learning and the time required to participate in the initiative, it must be stressed that the vast majority of cases where communities are not participating actively in the PCLC are the result of internal difficulties at the local level within the convening organizations. Some have lost their base funding, others have had multiple leadership changes, and some local partnerships have broken down due to internal politics. In the majority of these cases, the local convenors had, or continue to have, the intention to engage in Vibrant Communities and consider it to be pertinent to their work.

Sponsor representatives view the engagement of participating communities as a naturally evolving process through which some groups will prosper and others will struggle. Involvement may also be cyclical; in a number of cases the level of community engagement has fluctuated significantly. Given the flexible and evolving nature of the initiative, the need to remain patient is evident. At the same time, some sponsors feel that there should not be a great deal of effort dedicated to helping the weaker communities, since community engagement must be the result of individual will, commitment and

⁵ Annex 4 of this report provides a statistical comparison between Trail Builder community questionnaire responses to those of non-Trail Builders with regards to their overall perceptions of the PCLC, its supports, and the learning acquired.

capacities. If it becomes clear that some communities are not able to function within the structure of the initiative, most sponsors agree that they should concentrate on others where the potential is stronger.

3.4 Looking Ahead

Expanding Vibrant Communities?

The issue of PCLC expansion is currently being discussed among the sponsor organizations, some of whom are more enthusiastic about this idea than others. As discussed earlier, a high number of participating communities presents several advantages and disadvantages that should be carefully considered before moving forward. At the same time, since there are a number of communities whose engagement in the PCLC is quite weak and who are openly questioning their ability to remain involved in the initiative, reaching out to other communities could be a way to replenish the PCLC with new blood and enthusiasm.

Making the Case for Vibrant Communities through the Identification of Results

One of the most delicate issues faced by Vibrant Communities relates to the growing importance placed by sponsor organizations on the need to identify results achieved through the initiative. In order to “sell” the initiative to other funders and to make the argument for an injection of additional funding, the initiative must demonstrate what has been accomplished to date.

This issue is of greatest significant to the Trail Builders, who more than any one else must demonstrate the effect that their work is having at the local level. They are the initiative’s test cases and the overall success of the initiative largely relates to their own local experiences. Trail Builders have received coaching in evaluation through the initiative in preparation for this next step, however this has been one of the most challenging aspects of the initiative to date.

There has been some tension around the questions of what specific results should be measured, which indicators should be used for these results, and how data should be collected and reported. The need for succinct evaluation tools is clear, yet there is a great deal of uncertainty over the possibility of applying a single evaluation model that is flexible enough for the local realities in the various communities. Some communities have expressed a good deal of frustration over the fact that evaluation tools have been somewhat “imposed” on them by the national sponsors, and that in some cases their own evaluation and performance measurement models were replaced.

The need to develop participatory evaluation tools and methodologies with which national and local partners are comfortable will be one of the most important challenges facing the initiative in the year to come.

4 Relations between Vibrant Communities Partners

4.1 Relations between Sponsors

The relationships that exist between the three sponsors are unanimously deemed to be extremely supportive, and there is clearly an exceptionally high level of respect and trust between the three organizations. Each sponsor sees the others as offering critical sets of skills and expertise for the initiative, and all admire the commitment, rigour and quality of work of the other organizations. Despite some differences of opinions and challenges that have emerged throughout the initiative, there is a broad common understanding of what the initiative is aiming to achieve and how it should be approached. When differences have emerged, the high level of mutual trust has ensured that discussions are constructive and respectful. As Caledon and Tamarack are most closely involved in the day to day operations of the initiative, their collaboration is particularly close. Both deem their working relationship to be extremely positive and effective.

4.2 Relations between Communities and Sponsors

The relationships between sponsors and community partners are also deemed to be very positive by the overwhelming majority of respondents. Both community and sponsor representatives see the relationships to be highly respectful and authentic. Indeed, one of the principal strengths of the initiative as identified by both community and sponsor representatives is that the linkages within Vibrant Communities are not the traditional funder / recipient hierarchical relationships that characterize most poverty reduction initiatives. Sponsors don't use financial resources as a means to pressure communities, a fact that is highly appreciated by many convenors or community members who describe Vibrant Communities as "a model of partnership" and feel as though "we're all in it together". Again, the trust that exists between the various partners has helped to overcome some of the challenges or points of tension that have emerged to date. This will be of critical importance in the year to come as sponsors begin to encourage communities to demonstrate the results of their local initiatives.

Respondents overwhelmingly feel as though sponsors listen to communities and take whatever time is necessary to discuss the challenges faced in the communities. For their part, sponsors are generally appreciative of the dedication shown by local partners, and the quality of leadership demonstrated at the community level.

Although globally very positive, the relations that exist between sponsors and local communities vary a good deal. Some communities have exceptionally close relations with the sponsors and there is a significant level of communication and exchange, whereas some other communities aren't nearly as close. The communities that are further along in the initiative (i.e. the Trail Builders) and those that are consistent participants in learning events are generally those with whom the relationships are closest. Individual sponsors

also have stronger ties with the communities that are more involved in their specific areas of expertise.

In the majority of cases, the relationships between sponsors and communities are also largely centred on the local convenors. Several community respondents noted that beyond the coordinator and co-convenor representatives, there are virtually no ties between community members and national sponsors. The importance of developing greater linkages between community members and sponsors was highlighted by sponsors and community representatives alike.

Given their direct work with the individual communities, Tamarack has developed the closest links with local communities. Convenors and community members are more familiar with Tamarack staff than other sponsors, and have a particularly high level of appreciation for Tamarack's direct support to their work. As Tamarack's experience working with local communities expands and relationships deepen, a new level of openness - including the ability to be critical - has been established. At the same time, Tamarack representatives generally feel that they have less time overall for individual discussion with the communities given the increasing workload through the initiative. In some cases, the interactions with some of the communities are less frequent than they were early in the initiative.

Since Caledon's role is primarily centred on policy dialogue and research, they have less direct ties to the local communities. Still, the majority of local convenors claim to feel very close to Caledon representatives and appreciate the relationships that have been created. For its part, Caledon hopes to deepen its direct relationships with local communities in the year to come. Its efforts will include on-site "reflection sessions" to discuss learning and evaluation. It also hopes to provide communities with a greater role in the identification of policy and research topics.

There are fewer direct linkages between the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and participating communities since the McConnell Foundation is not generally involved in the daily operations of Vibrant Communities. At the same time, community representatives express a deep appreciation for the flexible attitude demonstrated by the McConnell Foundation as the principal funder of Vibrant Communities, and globally have a very positive view of the Foundation's commitment and dedication to local poverty reduction efforts.

4.3 Roles and Responsibilities of Partners

Community and sponsors representatives generally feel that the roles and responsibilities established through the initiative are appropriate, and no substantial changes were suggested. One specific issue identified during the interviews with sponsor organizations was the importance of continuing efforts to integrate the work of the three sponsors. Specific examples include: fundraising at a number of levels using the contacts available to each sponsor; a broader discussion around the issue of the evaluation of local efforts; and the integration of specific supports such as coaching and policy work.

The issue of fundraising is clearly an issue of much interest for community and sponsor organizations alike. Various individuals expressed hope that the McConnell foundation will continue to expand its efforts to expose other funders to the initiative (i.e. through the Funders Forum, etc.), while the continued dissemination of information and its lessons learned on the initiative is deemed crucial to raise the national recognition of the initiative, and to feed a greater collective reflection on poverty reduction in Canada.

Finally, as discussed in the report, there appears to be a desire for communities to take on a more strategic role in providing input to planning and decision-making within the initiative. Some respondents also suggested that communities be allowed more access to the formal decision-making processes of the initiative (i.e. the Steering Committee).

The PCLC Membership Agreement

The PCLC Membership Agreement is a means through which sponsors have attempted to formalize the roles and responsibilities of the various partners within the initiative. Essentially, it “sets a minimum bar needed to make the PCLC functional”. The key elements include the establishment of a multi sectoral convening group and a community Learning Strategy, as well as a commitment to participate actively in the PCLC events. For their part, sponsors committed themselves to providing opportunities for communities to plan learning events. Although the agreement was met with some initial reluctance on the part of participating communities, with further discussion it was accepted without much difficulty.

This agreement is deemed by sponsors to have been useful for clarifying certain key issues at the local level, particularly in terms of the expectations placed on participating communities. In some cases, it has forced communities that have wavered in their participation to “decide if they are in or out”. At the same time, there remains a good deal of uncertainty surrounding the agreement, as some local convenors are under the impression that the agreement was never finalized, and claim that they have never signed it. There may be a need to ensure that all partners have a shared understanding as to the status of this agreement. Given that a number of communities continue to struggle with implementation of the principles of this agreement, there may also be need for a follow-up discussion on the status of its principles in the various communities.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

Vibrant Communities is a highly ambitious initiative that seeks to create a national movement and systemic change around poverty reduction. It operates on a variety of levels, from ground level poverty reduction initiatives to national policy dialogue, and includes a broad representation of various societal actors and interests. The bar has been set very high, and the various partners have invested substantial time and energy into the initiative so the risks are also high.

The initiative has achieved some significant results to date. A number of participating communities have developed and are currently implementing comprehensive, multi sectoral poverty reduction initiatives at the local level. A strong national learning community has been established with a growing level of interest and participation from local and national participants. Various policy documents have been produced and policy discussions have involved a strong representation of various sectors. Meanwhile, efforts to bring additional funders on board are giving reason to be optimistic that the initiative will continue to expand in the years to come.

In addition to these results, Vibrant Communities also represents a very positive model of collaboration between national and community-level organizations. Sponsor and community representatives alike feel as though they are members of a true partnership where the opinions and interests of each are respected, where there exists an exceptional level of trust between the various participants, and where all members share the same fundamental objectives.

At the same time, the Vibrant Communities model and its various components, namely the Pan-Canadian Learning Community, also face a number of important challenges. Many of the challenges faced are inherent to the type of initiative being undertaken. Given the diversity of participating communities' local realities and interests, there is an inherent difficulty in ensuring that the activities and supports offered through the initiative are specific enough to be directly relevant and applicable at the local level, yet general enough to interest the various communities and to allow for diverse local circumstances. It is also extremely difficult to agree on the specific themes that should be of greatest focus given the diverging issues faced in participating communities.

It is also evident that learning takes a great deal of time and sustained effort. For learning to be of relevance, participants must make a significant investment in the learning process and make it a priority for their local group. As participants share experiences and lessons learned, and communicate in an increasingly open and constructive manner, learning will become increasingly relevant.

Still, investment in learning can be difficult for many participating communities. It requires human and financial resources that very few organizations working at the front lines of poverty reduction can afford. Further, learning done primarily over the telephone

is impersonal and many participants find it difficult to remain engaged or to bring in additional partners.

Given the high expectations for the initiative among sponsors and the limited resources available to participating communities through Vibrant Communities (particularly those in phases I and II), it should not be overly surprising that the initiative has not gone as far as some had originally hoped. At the same time, it is also clear that progress largely depends on the capacities and resources of the participating communities. There have been widely varying results to date, much of which can be attributed to differences at the local level including: human and financial resources; existing partnerships and collaboration; leadership styles; and internal cohesion. For some communities, Vibrant Communities and the PCLC have become integral parts of their local work, while others are only marginally involved in the process.

It is also evident that the initiative revolves to a large extent around the experiences of the Trail Builders. All are in the process of implementing collaborative, multi sectoral poverty reduction strategies at the local level, and they offer important case studies to be analysed by sponsors, other participating communities, and interested actors across Canada. They are generally more engaged in the various facets of the initiative such as the PCLC, and perceive them to be of greater importance to their work at the local level. In many ways, these communities represent the glue that bonds Vibrant Communities and the PCLC. Other participating communities are interested in learning from these models as they eye an eventual graduation to Trail Builder status, and it seems important to focus these communities on the goal of reaching Phase III by injecting additional resources for the years to come.

As the initiative moves forward, the importance of identifying new sources of funding to expand its activities becomes increasingly clear. However, with this also comes the importance of taking stock of what has been accomplished to date, a sensitive topic that must involve the definition of results using specific indicators. Given the varying local contexts and capacities, this step represents a significant challenge for the initiative.

In order to respond to these and other key challenges facing Vibrant Communities, the following recommendations are proposed:

To make learning as relevant and practical as possible to participating communities:

- Sponsors and participating communities should explore new and more strategic mechanisms through which communities may provide input into the planning of the initiative, including the use of planning committees for learning events.
- Sponsors and participating communities should continue to experiment with learning formats that offer a greater opportunity for peer-to-peer learning, as well as a greater leadership role for communities in the presentation of learning topics and information.

- Sponsors should clarify and explain in more detail the coaching support, notably its purpose and the means through which it may be accessed. Each community should be assigned a specific individual that will provide ongoing coaching assistance to their local efforts.

To make local participation in Vibrant Communities more manageable for local leads:

- Sponsors should consider reducing the number of events organized through the PCLC or focusing the learning on a smaller number of key themes, using an approach that integrates the various supports provided through the PCLC. Initiatives such as the living wage series should provide a model for this type of approach.
- Local convenors, with the support of coaches, should renew and deepen their efforts to establish and/or strengthen local working groups in participating communities in order to ensure a decentralization of leadership and the participation of a wider sector of the population in learning planning and activities.

To promote a broader dissemination of learning at the local level:

- Local convenors, with the support of other local leads, coaches and sponsors, should explore the most effective means to disseminate learning at the local level to the broader community. Discussions on this topic should also be undertaken at the national level with the full PCLC membership, and sponsors should consider how resources could best be allocated to these efforts.
- Sponsor organizations should prioritize the consistent translation of learning events and activities into French in order to ensure that the initiative is more inclusive and truly ‘Pan-Canadian’ in nature.

To foster stronger inter-community relationships:

- New mechanisms through which relationships between communities may be deepened should be explored, including mentoring or the establishment of sub-groups and learning clusters based on geographic location, themes of interest, community size, and phase of operations within Vibrant Communities. Since there does not appear to be consensus as to which of these approaches would be most relevant, there is a need for greater discussion among community and sponsor representatives around this issue, as well as for experimentation and flexibility.
- Sponsors should ensure that local convenors and learning leads have access to detailed information on the activities of each participating community, including names and contact information for key individuals.

To deepen the body of knowledge being created and disseminated through the initiative:

- Sponsors and local communities should work together to ensure that policy research and dialogue incorporates lessons learned from the various multi sectoral poverty reduction efforts being carried out at the local level.
- Sponsors and local communities should identify challenges and lessons learned specific to the various local conditions in the participating communities, including the nature of local leadership and the size and type of communities involved.

To ensure the continued growth and sustainability of the initiative:

- Sponsors should continue to explore additional sources of funding to ensure that additional communities may continue to strive to become Trail Builders.
- Sponsors and communities must continue to discuss the issue of demonstrating results to date, and more specifically the issue of performance measurement and evaluation of local results. Given the sensitive nature of this topic, the need for a participatory approach to the development of evaluation tools and methodologies is evident.
- Sponsors and communities should revisit the PCLC Membership Agreement to ensure that its purpose and status is clearly understood by all partners. Given that a number of communities continue to struggle with implementation of the principles of this agreement, there may also be need for a follow-up discussion on its status in the various communities and for the identification of strategies to ensure that its principles are respected.
- Sponsors and communities should begin to develop strategies to ensure the long-term sustainability of local multi sectoral poverty reduction efforts beyond the Vibrant Communities timeframe, notably by focusing on local leadership and coordination structures.

