

## ***Policy Change from the Ground Up: Key Insights from the Learning Series***

The following document presents key insights about community involvement in policy development derived from the first four sessions of the *Policy Change from the Ground Up* learning series. After review by participants in the series, these points will be combined with additional observations from the literature and elaborated in a formal paper.

*Policy Change from the Ground Up* is a learning series in which community practitioners have been exploring the challenges and opportunities associated with community-based policy making. Following an introductory session framing the topic, participants examined a series of successful local policy initiatives in the areas of income security, neighbourhood revitalization and affordable housing.

This document identifies key points from the learning series in the following areas:

- I. Framing the Issue: Creating New Modes of Governance
- II. Opportunities and Challenges
- III. The Value-Added of Community Involvement
- IV. Key Roles
- V. Effective Practices

### ***I. Framing the Issue: Creating New Modes of Governance***

- A. Specific policy change initiatives explored during the series were seen as steps in a broad, long-term process of building new modes of governance.
- B. The process involves a shift from relatively centralized, top down government to much more participatory and collaborative modes of governance.
- C. The impetus behind this general trend is a growing desire of citizens to have a more direct involvement in shaping issues that affect them, and a growing recognition within government that government/community collaboration yields more effective policies.
- D. Although commitment to these new ways of doing things are by no means universal within government, there are significant pockets of support and therefore a good basis for communities to pursue initiatives in this area.

- E. Progress in bringing about desired changes is uneven – two steps forward, one step back – but not impossible.
- F. There are significant cultural and institutional barriers to developing new ways of governing; it involves learning substantially new ways of thinking and acting on the part of both government and community.
- G. A variety of new skills and capacities can be identified for both government officials and community members as they try to bring into being new modes of governance.
- H. Community panelists consistently saw their work in this broad, and long-term context: notwithstanding the immediate goals of specific initiatives, overall emphasis was placed on building the foundations (relationships, principles, ways of doing things) that would foster more collaborative forms of governance in the long term.
- I. While strategies of confrontation can be important in bringing about systemic and policy change, the emphasis in this learning series was on collaborative strategies.
- J. The role of bridge persons and organizations was identified as critical.
- K. In broad terms, the work could be broken into three basic areas:
  - i. Voice – Strengthening the voice of the community with respect to policy issues
  - ii. Responsiveness – Enhancing the responsiveness of government to community involvement
  - iii. Bridging – Developing structures and processes that enable government/ community collaboration on an ongoing basis.
- L. Specific initiatives are the means for gradually building the relationships, skills, processes and structures needed, and to demonstrate the value of community/government collaboration.

## ***II. Opportunities and Challenges***

- A. In general, government/community collaboration offers opportunities on both sides:
  - i. government can access ideas, insights and awareness of local citizens
  - ii. local people can access resources of various kinds (e.g., financial, technical expertise) and can influence how policies and programs are designed and implemented.
- B. In terms of public policy, there are at least four types of initiatives communities may pursue:

- i. Promote new policies – getting an issue on the public agenda; making the case for the policy
  - ii. Modify existing policies – improving features; removing barriers
  - iii. Improve the procedures for putting policies into effect – enhancing flexibility and accessibility
  - iv. Changing ways in which governments interact with communities – governance.
- C. Notwithstanding the opportunities, there also are challenges:
- i. Collaborative initiatives take time and energy; may be seen as the ‘umpteenth’ item on a crowded desk and given low priority
  - ii. High staff turnover within government makes it difficult to build relationships needed to engage successfully in collaborative policy making
  - iii. When government officials move, they often take their knowledge with them; communities are becoming the prime source of knowledge on various issues but lack policy-making authority
  - iv. Given their distance from the ‘front lines,’ senior civil servants may find it particularly difficult to appreciate the value of closer collaboration between government and community
  - v. Community groups often feel distant from the policy making process, may know little about what is involved or not consider it an area where they can have influence
  - vi. Mounting a policy change initiative requires substantial resources; in some cases, communities may not have the structures in place to provide the organizing, research and other supports needed to pursue such efforts.
- D. Motivation? The potential gains are substantial in at least four respects:
- i. Scale – a policy change can affect a large number of people, e.g., AISH initiative helped generate benefits for
  - ii. Long term – the impact of a policy change is long term, e.g., Regional Housing Trust Fund or Make Tax Time Pay
  - iii. Opportunity – a change in policy can create new types of opportunities for people, e.g., increased earned income exemptions under AISH making work a more viable option for persons with disabilities
  - iv. Spin-offs – policy change collaborations can generate spin-offs that support other aspects of a community group’s work, e.g., Vibrant Communities Edmonton.

### ***III. The Value-Added of Community Involvement***

- A. In general, community groups bring a depth of knowledge about the local situation that is needed for improving the design and implementation of public policy in the local context. Specifically:
  - i. Community groups are close to the ground and therefore able to recognize issues that policy makers may overlook, i.e., how policies or programs play out in practice on the ground
  - ii. Groups with comprehensive or holistic perspectives are particularly adept at identifying where policies or programs from different departments or levels of government may be working at cross purposes
  - iii. Local people know ‘where the ice is thin’ – i.e., how their communities work, what their strengths and weaknesses are – and can therefore help customize how public policies are implemented in the local context
  - iv. Community groups are well-positioned to engage the local partners who can improve understanding of a policy issue or strategies for implementing a policy or program
  - v. Due to physical proximity, communities are excellent sites for building relations among people from diverse backgrounds that can lead to innovative policy solutions.
  
- B. Specific capacities and skills that community groups can contribute to the policy making process include:
  - i. Being an ear to the ground able to recognize where policy issues exist
  - ii. Bridging between government and community
  - iii. Undertaking solid research
  - iv. Mobilizing/engaging partners
  - v. Communicating effectively (speaking, writing, media relations)
  - vi. Resolving conflicts and solving problems
  - vii. Building relations and capacity for the long term.

### ***IV. Effective Practices***

- A. Build trust on both sides
  - i. Be transparent
  - ii. Lower the threat level by treating the initiative as an experiment and a learning opportunity (Vivre Saint Michel en santé)
  - iii. Start where people are and move at an appropriate pace (Surrey)
  - iv. Be sensitive to the concerns that government people express and be careful about pushing on sensitive issues, e.g., municipal government concern about presenting Bridgeview as an impoverished or distressed neighbourhood (Surrey)
  - v. Don’t ask for too much at the outset – let people work and learn together (Saint John)

- vi. Create opportunities for people to get to know one another over a period of time, e.g., structures like the Housing Affordability Partnership or Friends of Bridgeview
  - vii. Recognize the different levels and types of participation that may be appropriate for various government officials (elected and non-elected) – sometimes a more limited involvement is more appropriate or helpful; keep people informed and connected throughout (Calgary’s AISH Initiative)
  - viii. Involve partners early in the process (Surrey)
  - ix. ‘Servant leadership’ is appropriate for building ownership of the effort among all partners (Waterloo)
  - x. Be careful to recognize the contributions of all involved when reporting on the outcomes of your collaboration’s work.
- B. Take a solution-oriented approach, i.e., avoid blaming and employ good problem-solving skills.
- i. Channel frustrations/tensions toward the search for solutions.
- C. Especially in the early stages of a collaboration’s work, it may be wise to select initiatives around which there is a relatively good chance of building momentum
- i. Some policy issues are particularly intractable and may not yield results for a long time; such an issue could put a damper on the collaboration’s work whereas a relatively early success could provide a significant boost
  - ii. Appropriate initiatives may be identified as readily by government partners/sources as by community partners, e.g., uptake of Alberta Child Health Benefit.
- D. Identify ‘champions’ who will support your work and ‘bridge persons’ who can explain things in terms that community and government can both understand.
- E. Build your collaboration’s knowledge about the public policy process including:
- i. The steps in policy making
  - ii. The players and their roles
  - iii. Timing – points at which interventions can be most effective.
- F. Recognize that there are ‘windows of opportunity’ and be prepared to take advantage of them.
- G. Know your community and your issue: do your homework!
- i. Clearly define the problem and its roots
  - ii. Develop solid information about the situation you are addressing: numbers, the human face of the issue, and understanding of the underlying problem
  - iii. Be sure that you are aware of the kind of information that is needed by policy makers and that you are able to present that information in an effective format.

- H. Build a strong *case for support* (argument and evidence) and *base of support* (individuals, organizations, institutions) for what you are proposing:
- i. Your case for support may sometimes have significant technical dimensions to it so efforts may be needed to secure expertise on various issues, e.g., legal issues in the Niagara housing initiative
  - ii. The ‘public’ can be the ‘general public’ or another ‘public’ of particular relevance to the issue, e.g., local business and residents near the proposed CAW/Bethlehem Place housing development
  - iii. Building this support may be a long-term process in itself, e.g., annual Affordable Housing Week to inform public about housing issues
  - iv. Note the added value of a multi-sectoral network: shows that the issue has been vetted by groups who bring substantially different perspectives; adds credibility when ‘unusual suspects’ are involved; clout of business community.
- I. As much as possible, speak with one voice (multi-sectoral, especially)
- i. Vibrant Communities Saint John: “Multi-sector leadership, within communities, impresses senior governments.”
- J. Put forward clear, specific and reasonable proposals.
- i. In general, a limited set of priorities is stronger than a long list of recommendations, e.g., VCSJ’s one ‘ask’
  - ii. Try to identify the ‘catalytic’ actions that will have the greatest and most sustained impact on the issue, e.g., putting a full-time CMHC official in Saint John focused on tackling the City’s affordable housing challenge.
- K. Make effective use of the ‘inside game’ (direct relationship building with key decision makers) and the ‘outside game’ (building public support for the issue).
- L. Work with both elected and non-elected officials
- i. The extraordinary value of supportive individuals within government – serving as champions or as bridge persons – was revealed in more than one initiative
  - ii. Keep each informed of the other’s involvement.
- M. Recognize the limits of local action and the need, in some cases, to link with other communities or non-local agencies in order to influence policies of a non-local nature
- i. Vibrant Communities Calgary has moved from a local campaign for discount bus passes to a province-wide effort due to the need for provincial government funding.
- N. Be prepared to persevere through the twists and turns, ups and downs that are often associated with policy change initiatives!

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