

Policy Change from the Ground Up Tele-Learning Series - March 2, 2006

Call #1 – Framing the Issue

Summary of Comments by Sherri Torjman
and Conversation with Michelle Hebert Boyd

Comments by Sherri Torjman

I am very pleased to be convening this learning series. It is an area that Caledon has been exploring in a variety of ways for quite some time through our work in Vibrant Communities and a number of other initiatives. What particularly excites me about this learning series is that it will focus on concrete examples where our local partners in Vibrant Communities have been working on the ground in their communities and with various levels of government to bring about policy changes that support poverty reduction. So this is an exceptional opportunity for us all to explore in very practical terms what is involved in community efforts to shape public policy.

You likely all have seen an overview of the learning series. If not, it is available on the Vibrant Communities website. Briefly, the purpose of the series is to facilitate peer learning among people interested in strengthening community involvement in shaping public policy. This first session will introduce the topic and frame the issues to be explored in future calls. The next three sessions will focus on specific examples of policy change initiatives drawn from the work of local initiatives in Vibrant Communities. Each of these sessions will focus on a different substantive issue related to poverty reduction: the first will address income security issues, the second neighbourhood revitalization and the third will focus on affordable housing. We will hear about specific initiatives in each of these areas and then collectively mine these experiences for insights and lessons they can provide. These four sessions will take us to June. We will then break for the summer and reconvene in the fall. Over the course of the summer, Eric Leviten-Reid from Caledon will outline the key points emerging from our discussions and from additional research on community-based policy making. We will then reconvene in September for a final session to review these key points. Based on feedback from participants, Eric will proceed to write a paper articulating our understanding of the opportunities, challenges and effective strategies for enhancing community involvement in policy making, with special reference to issues of poverty reduction. We see this as a way of deepening and clarifying the understanding of these issues which can support a next round of work in this area.

I want to make a few other comments by way of introduction to the series, but before I do that let me first outline for you today's call. In a moment, I will call on my colleague from Caledon, Eric Leviten-Reid, to conduct an interview with Michelle Hebert Boyd from the Public Health Agency of Canada – Atlantic Region. Michelle has been very involved in the Public Health Agencies efforts to promote 'healthy policy development.' Michelle is co-author of *Capacity Building: Linking Community Experience to Public Policy*, which we think is a wonderful introduction to some of the opportunities and challenges in this area. Eric will interview Michelle for 15 to 20 minutes to raise some of the issues that the Public Health Agency has identified related to this work. Welcome

Michelle. We are very glad that you could join us today. Following the interview, we will open the call to questions, comments and discussions from everyone with respect to what we all see as some of the basic issues and themes that we would want to explore in the course of this learning series. We want to know, based on your experience and interests, what some of the key factors are that need to be addressed in order to strengthen community involvement in shaping public policy.

Before we proceed, I want to make just a few other brief comments by way of introduction to this topic.

Most of you are already familiar with Vibrant Communities, so I will mention it only briefly. Vibrant Communities was started in 2002 as a community-driven effort to reduce poverty in Canada by creating partnerships between people, organizations, businesses and governments. Vibrant Communities currently links 16 communities, from British Columbia to Newfoundland, in a collective effort to test the most effective ways to reduce poverty. Together, these communities make up the Pan-Canadian Learning Community. They hold regular teleconferences and use regional and national forums to discuss local efforts to reduce poverty and develop solutions by learning from each other's experience. Currently six trail builders are implementing community plans for poverty reduction. Although this learning series is open to all who are interested, it is also one of the activities of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community.

More and more, we are seeing a growing interest on the part of citizens to have more direct involvement in shaping public policy; a movement from conventional government to 'governance.' These are big changes that are already under way, but require substantial adjustments on the part of both government and communities, so there is lots of learning to do.

Community involvement in policy development is important to make sure that solutions to community problems are appropriate, and also that they work together. Sometimes a solution that looks good when seen from one perspective can conflict with something else that is going on. For example, a subsidy from one program may render someone ineligible for another program. So it is important to have good policy that is promoting well-being, and also good policy that is not inadvertently creating barriers for people.

We're going to be hearing specific examples over the next few months of the kind of roles that communities are playing in policy making. I think we can look at three major streams of community involvement in policy. The first is working for the adoption of new policies, the second is working to modify existing policies in some way, and the third is working to change the procedures by which policy is put into effect into communities. These three streams may involve different types of work, and different information that needs to be gathered. In the first case, you are looking at making a good case for why something new is required. An example would be BC's Capital Region's work on establishing a new Housing Trust Fund. Housing has of course been on the public agenda for some time, but this community worked towards the creation of a new financing mechanism. They had to prepare an extensive case on why that would be

important. Then, in some other areas, there are issues that are not even really on the public radar screen yet – for instance, recently a flood of work had to be done to get respite for caregivers onto the public agenda. This was not a new issue, but it was new to the national agenda.

In terms modification of existing policy, we'll hear in this series about three different types of modification that communities work towards. The first is when there is a policy in place, but it is not good enough. This is often the case with income security programs, and we will discuss that more in April's session when we discuss the work done by Vibrant Communities Calgary to engage citizens around determining necessary changes to the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program. The second type of situation where communities might work towards policy modification are situations where policies and programs exist but people are for some reason not accessing them – examples of communities working in this arena are Edmonton's work around tax credit uptake and Waterloo Region's work on increasing the uptake of the Guaranteed Income Supplement. There is a benefit already in place, and the work centers around ensuring that people know about it and can gain access to it. Modification might also take place around identification and removal of the barriers that some programs have in place – for example, welfare policy that makes it difficult for people to work towards building assets while still receiving the help they need. The third type of policy modification that communities often work towards centers around issues of flexibility and access – for instance, changes made to public transport subsidies in Niagara and Calgary, or some of the changes in recreation policy that have taken place in Ottawa with respect to things like user fees and uniforms.

The third and final stream of community involvement in policy work involves looking at the procedures governments are using to interface with communities, such as the application forms for grants and the requirements for evaluation and reporting. Caledon is trying to work with the federal government around consolidating some of these requirements so that these processes can be easier on communities overall.

There are many challenges. There is a need for learning in many areas. With some of these comments as background, let me now introduce Eric Leviten-Reid. Eric is a research associate with Caledon and is extensively involved with Vibrant Communities and other community-based initiatives, particularly in facilitating learning and evaluation efforts in these initiatives and supporting the policy-related work that Caledon is doing. He will interview Michelle Hebert Boyd about the work that the Public Health Agency of Canada – Atlantic Region has done in linking community experience to public policy.

Interview with Michelle Hebert Boyd by Eric Leviten-Reid

Sherri's introduction is helpful, because we are in the course of this learning series looking at some of the "big picture" things that she mentioned around collaboration between citizens and government, some very substantive issues along the lines of the examples she gave, and then throughout looking at HOW to enhance this collaboration between communities and governments around making policies.

Welcome, Michelle, and thank you very much for joining us this morning. Michelle is a Program Consultant with the Population Health Fund of the Public Health Agency of Canada – Atlantic Region. She has a background in social work, in community development, and also in journalism. Michelle, the paper we are going to talk about today is really part of a larger body of work that the Public Health Agency of Canada – Atlantic Region has been pursuing over the last number of years on the theme of collaborative policy making. Can you tell us a bit about that work and why your agency became involved in it?

There were a number of things that led us to get involved in this work. The most important was the social and political climate in Atlantic Canada the late 90s when the Population Health Fund was established. The work we were doing with our Health Promotion Fund wasn't having the impact we wanted, and so in Atlantic Canada, we decided to use it in a particular way. Rather than continue with funding one-off health promotion projects, the decision was made to direct it to strengthening collaborative policymaking. The decision to do this emerged out of other aspects of the work being done in the Atlantic Region by Health Canada, particularly on social and economic inclusion. It was a response to something of a crisis in Atlantic Canada related to closure of the inshore fishery and major cuts in federal government spending. These conditions precipitated a search for new solutions to address deeply rooted problems. Government/community collaboration on policy issues was seen as part of this new way. It also reflected the community's apparent interest to do more, to have more of a say. The Atlantic Region was rather on the vanguard in terms of this approach within Health Canada. Although it has been taken up increasingly within the department and in other regions it has been a gradual process and is still quite fragile.

So would you say that the impetus behind this work was similar to the things Sherri pointed to earlier - citizen desire to have more say, the broad trend toward 'governance' rather than government - as factors driving interest in community involvement in policymaking?

Yes, at the time no one else was doing this. We really had to defend ourselves and our rationale for working on policy. We knew that in order to have a more inclusive society, we needed to work on policy. We didn't know how to do that b/c that wasn't how we were used to working, so in the late 90s we had a big learning curve for ourselves before we could really think about working with communities.

We can talk more about this later in the call, but overall, how would you describe the progress in shifting the way government and communities work together on policy development? Is it tough sledding or going very smoothly?

There are moments of both. At the beginning it was a tough sell. Even internally, except for the ones working on this directly, people weren't all that receptive to it. People had a hard time believing this was what communities would want. We didn't want to be telling

communities what they were going to do. We had to justify to ourselves what we meant by “influencing policy” and how that had anything to do with Health Canada.

And your own background Michelle. How did you become involved and what role have you played in this work?

I started working for Health Canada in January of 2000. I became involved just as the department was doing community consultations about the role of community in collaborative policy making. We had to do a lot of relationship-building, and to educate ourselves about how we could do what was useful for communities and make the biggest impact we could.

I was asked to help prepare a document that would summarize the input received from consultations and other research, and serve as a tool to support community involvement in policy development.

There really are a number of dimensions to the Public Health Agency’s work in this area and we can touch on other parts of them as we go, but for this session, we wanted to focus especially on the paper you wrote with Julie Devon Dodd, *Capacity Building: Linking Community Experience to Public Policy*. We are interested in this paper, in particular, because it provides a helpful way of organizing some of the thinking about linking community and government in policy making. My understanding is that this paper both grew out of community consultations your agency conducted, input from government officials themselves and a review of other literature on the topic. Is that right?

Yes, this resource was meant to reflect what communities were saying about their potential participation in the policymaking process. It drew from a literature review conducted by the department as well but much of the paper is drawn from the discussions with community people.

So, for example, in the paper, one of the things you do is to identify the kinds of capacities that are needed for individuals and for communities to participate in collaborative policymaking. Did those lists come from your consultations with people in communities participating in or planning to participate in this type of activity?

A lot of things you’ll see in there, the strategies and the lists, were things that came out of consultations and meetings.

We’ll get into more detail in a moment but I’m interested in hearing some of the highlights of what you’ve found. First, what are the key things that people in the community say about the opportunities and the challenges involved in trying to influence public policy?

The basic challenge was simply that this was a core change in the way of working – for both government and communities. It was not business as usual; it required some

creative re-working of how people did things. People were being asked to work in a completely new way and one that they didn't immediately see as relevant.

Another challenge is that policy-making is a long-term process, and much funding is very time-limited – it comes in small chunks for small time periods. We don't expect policy change within that time frame, but try to see it as seed money.

As far as opportunity – there are great opportunities to work with new partners and sectors, and to work on issues that are going to make a long-term impact.

For government, the opportunity is to really get good information and do better problem solving by working with people who actually have the answers. Bureaucrats are often far removed – they haven't actually worked in a locality either at all, or for a short time only. Influencing the determinants of health requires that internal knowledge.

The biggest challenge for government is maybe that over the course of the initiative, from 2000 – present, we've had a somewhat unstable political environment. We've not known whether funding would continue, whether we were starting something that we'd be able to finish.

And how about for government officials? What do they tend to see as the key opportunities or challenges for working with communities on policy issues?

Within government, the high turnover rate within specific jobs was problematic. Relationships with community participants and knowledge of the issues they were dealing with was critical. When people move, you are back to square one.

Another basic challenge was this collaborative work often being one of 14 things on your desk, and the one that could most easily fall off.

The resource paper *Bringing Citizen Voice and Client Focus into Service Delivery* identifies three dimensions of this work: strengthening community voice, enhancing the responsiveness of government and creating bridges that facilitate government/community collaboration. The approach you take in your paper is certainly similar. In particular, you talk about the importance of bridging and bridge persons. One of the important ideas you present in your paper pertains to the role of bridge persons. What are bridge persons and why are they important?

The bridging role is critical. It takes more than having or having had experience in both government and community. It is more a set of skills and abilities around translating between two different realities and cultures. In some situations, the bridge person is a mediator, but the role might more aptly be described as a translator – someone who can explain things in terms that both communities and governments can understand. It can be a hard role, as a bridge person can work in the community yet not be seen as a part of that community, which is difficult for many people.

The bridging role can also be the role of an organization – an organization can act as a convenor and serve as the bridge. The people involved in the convening group should understand government and community – not just one community but a broad community – and this can be very effective. For instance, in Nova Scotia, Planned Parenthood did a very good job of serving as the bridge between communities and the government around issues of sexual health policy.

Another key aspect of your paper is the idea that there are three levels of capacity building needed to improve collaboration in policy making: individual, community and system. Let's take them one at a time and talk briefly about the kinds of capacities needed and some of the strategies that can be used to develop them. For the purposes of this call we just want to give people a taste. In the paper, you identify eight or nine personal capacities helpful for collaborative policy making. What are two or three that seem to you to be particularly important and what are some of the strategies that can be used to build those capacities?

I want to clarify that these lists of competencies came out of the community consultations themselves – so these are the things people were telling us were needed, and the things we tried to work on within ourselves.

Communication skills were always one of the top competencies mentioned – the ability to listen actively and respectfully, and also the need to develop skills in research, writing, and presentation skills.

Also brought up time and time again was the importance of the ability to resolve conflicts, and to engage in conflict resolution in a way that achieved goals and improved relationships. Related to this are the ability and the desire to approach people and situations with the intent to learn and share, and also the need to be purposeful about creating opportunities to listen to other points of view.

How about capacity building at the community level? What are the key issues here and one or two strategies that can help build those capacities?

Communication, again, was the number one capacity identified – the ability to understand what kind of information is needed, how to communicate issues, and what will actually be able to have an impact on policy. It is essential to understand what types of information and what formats can be easily used by policy makers, and to understand your audience and who actually holds the power to make decisions in the policy arena.

Finally, the system level. What do you mean by system, and what kinds of capacities need to be built here?

Systems can refer to formal structures at any level from family and neighbourhood up to provincial and federal governments. A policy can be something as obtuse as the Lobbyist Registration Act, or something as simple as your child's bedtime – which is a policy in your house.

The system level comes down a lot to trust and transparency. It is about examining the way you do your work to make sure you're not just consulting with communities after you've made decisions, but that you're getting communities involved in the policy process from the outset, so that they are involved in defining the issues and the policy options. This is a real change in the way that systems do their work.

Thank you so much, Michelle, for spending this time with us today. You have given us a real set of reference points for what is possible for communities working towards policy change, and also a real sense of the challenges involved. I'd like to point out that a lot of case studies from the work done in Atlantic Canada can be found in the document *What Works! Putting Community Issues on the Policy Agenda*.

Question and Answer Period

Question: I am interested in learning more about the coaching that you do with the groups you work with. This is so valuable, but it seems that it could be hard, in your role as a funder, to also engage community groups as a coach. How have you struck the balance between your role as a funder and this coaching role?

Michelle: Sometimes we have been criticized for that. There are groups that want to see us only as the government funder and would prefer we not be involved with them in a coaching aspect, so it is good to hear you speak positively of the coaching aspect.

Question: When grants are provided, are they for communities to work on policy, or are they for joint community-government initiatives, or what exactly is the relationship with the government?

Michelle: At first, in 2001, it was government funding communities to increase their capacity to work on policy. At that point they were learning about the process, more than engaging in actual policy work. As time has gone on, government has become involved as a partner in the actual projects. In Saint John, for instance, there have been municipal people involved in the policy work going on around some of the issues regarding teen parents. So at this point, there is some of each.

Question: The idea of a convening organization serving the bridging function is very relevant to Vibrant Communities. Could you tell us more about this role, particularly about the example you gave of Planned Parenthood's work in Nova Scotia?

Michelle: In Nova Scotia, Planned Parenthood served a bridging role. Nova Scotia had no comprehensive sexual health policy, so Planned Parenthood wanted to work with the Nova Scotia Department of Health, and later the Department of Health Promotion, to create some kind of policy. Planned Parenthood in Nova Scotia is based in Halifax. They did outreach with their affiliates to draw in people from a wide context – schools, parents, youth, clergy – into community circles. Planned Parenthood Nova Scotia then

collected the information and helped the communities to share information, both internally and among the different communities, and to problem solve.

Question: How did you personally experience the transition from being a “community person” to being a “bridge person”?

Michelle: Most of my colleagues have experienced this. We worked in the community, then went to work in government, and when we go back into the community in that role we are seen as a “funder.” And we are treated differently, not necessarily as an ally, but now as someone who holds power and control. I wasn’t comfortable with this and neither were a lot of my colleagues, so a lot of work we’ve done has been on trying to break down these barriers. We wrote a job description for ourselves instead of relying on the generic one that comes down from the federal government. We have worked on redefining our working relationships. It’s been hard to get past the stereotypes of the government funder. Especially for me, coming from a social work background, it’s hard when people see me as an uncaring bureaucrat.

Comment: Some of the things that you are saying could apply to organizations trying to play that bridging role. For instance, convenors being the recipient of money and the disbursor of money for various projects could cause us to be seen differently over time. We need to keep in mind the issues around the bridging role that could inadvertently create problems for convenors.

Question: I remember when sustainability wasn’t as big an issue as it is today. The local communities had greater control over their local tax base. There was an ability, because there weren’t as many strings attached to funds, for the community to be far more responsive to community issues. Have you explored the need for local communities to have control of their funding?

Michelle: Sustainability is a huge issue for us. The time-limited nature of our funding is always a concern when reviewing proposals – can this work be continued without our support? We try not to have programs go into multiple phases. We try to help groups reach out to other groups, and in that way bolster their resources to continue the work.

Eric: Part of what I’ve seen in our recent work is the tension around accountability around how funds are used, which translates into narrow guidelines and short-term funding that make it more difficult to be flexible and responsive. On the other hand, in Action for Neighbourhood Change, an observation a government person made recently was that a project being pursued in a way where the government and community are working closely as partners in directing the initiative all along the way really strengthens the accountability, because there are such close ties. So, whatever the level of government, the key to flexibility and responsiveness may be this shift to stronger relationships and closer communication between communities and policy makers.

Sherri – Opportunities need to be created for funders to be part of the accountability process instead of creating unrealistic expectations for communities. In the Vibrant

Communities Funders Network, funders themselves are being asked to consider issues related to financing community efforts and helping to ensure sustainability.

Question: Part of the structure we try to use in Vibrant Communities is getting partners from different sectors sitting down at same table. Getting people from the government side to be involved in ongoing collaboration with community partners hasn't always been so easy. Is that an area we want to explore more as this learning series goes on – what kind of structures can be created to enable this, and what are the opportunities and obstacles in bringing communities and governments together consistently around these issues?

Comment: Conversation would be useful. In our community we are challenged in engaging the municipal government.

Sherri – We had this problem too, when we did the Policy Dialogue. We have continued working towards this structure in Action for Neighbourhood Change, but it is very difficult. We struggle with consistency in the people who come – they change continually – you establish a relationship with someone and then they are off somewhere else.

Comment: Relationship building needs to start at a small level – around one initiative. If you start at a higher policy level it can be like people speaking different languages

Michelle: In the Atlantic Region, because we are so small, we find that we work with the same people over and over on a variety of initiatives. So in most cases when a community wants to work with government on a policy issue, it is someone they've worked with in another capacity and there is a relationship there. A barrier, though, is the high level of turnover in government. You may build a relationship with a person who has a lot of personal investment in this work, and the person who replaces them sees it as just one of 14 things on their desk.

Question: It's not just a matter of creating sustained relationships – when people leave they also take with them the knowledge that they have gained. We find we are continually briefing new people, so to sustain core knowledge around a given policy area has been very difficult. In many cases, the core knowledge is no longer within government, but in the communities. How can we minimize the time we have to spend bringing people up to date all the time?

Michelle: At least some governments are being astute enough to hire people who have been in the business. But it speaks to that piece of knowledge – not only do people come and go, but departments come and go, governments come and go, and government priorities change.

Comment: Two factors we need to remember are timing and constraints. When events are happening and the community is trying to influence policy, keep in mind that there are windows of opportunity in government and when they open you have to grab them. You have to be prepared for these windows. Communities also need to bear in mind that

there are constraints on decision-makers as well. For instance, increasing benefit levels may require cuts elsewhere. There is not an infinite budget.

Question: What kind of buy-in has come from the political part of government in Atlantic Canada so far?

Michelle: We are working with four provinces instead of one. Our difficulty has been getting support from certain senior people in Ottawa who would rather take our money and spend it on things like security, especially post 9/11. It is difficult for people at senior political levels to see the value of our work, of working with communities.



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