



**A Comprehensive  
Approach to Poverty  
Using Strategic Drivers**  
*An Aide for Action*



*By: Garry Loewen*



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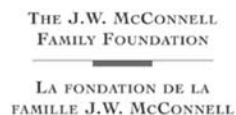
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## About Vibrant Communities

Vibrant Communities is a unique initiative that supports and links collaborations from over a dozen urban centers from across Canada experimenting with comprehensive and collaborative approaches to reduce poverty.

Started in 2002 by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the network includes community collaborations from B.C.'s Capital Region, Abbotsford, Surrey, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Waterloo Region, Hamilton, Niagara Region, Trois Rivieres, the Saint Michel neighborhood in Montreal, Saint John and St. John's.

The Vibrant Communities initiative is generously supported by contributions from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Maytree and Human Resources and Social Development Canada as well as from a number of other private and community organizations.

## About This Aide

The Strategic Driver Approach is one in a series of aides for action that the sponsors of Vibrant Communities have developed to assist communities at different stages of their poverty reduction initiative.

These aides are based on the experience of communities participating in Vibrant Communities, guided by insights of experts and practitioners from across North America and beyond and informed by the experience of their authors.

The template of the aide is inspired by those used in [Social Analysis Systems](#) and [Edgeware](#) online compendium of techniques. While this aide is not related to any of those techniques, we have found their formats easy to use and incorporated some elements of each into this document.

This aide is a living document which authors and Tamarack may upgrade periodically based on new learnings and feedback from readers.

Please note that this tool can be downloaded free of charge.

## About The Author



Garry Loewen has worked as a business person, parish minister, economic development director and community activist. He helped found and has been an active leader of Vibrant Communities since 2002.

Early in his working life, Garry held senior management positions with Air Canada, including Executive Assistant to the President and General Manager of Air Canada's operations at Toronto International Airport. He then served as a parish minister for five years.

Garry is currently self-employed as a community and economic development consultant. From 1999 to 2002, Garry served as Executive Director of the North End Community Renewal Corporation in Winnipeg, and from 1999 to 2000, was Executive Director of The Canadian Community Economic Development Network. He was also Community Economic Development Director for the Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba from 1991 to 2000. Garry was the founding Executive Director of SEED Winnipeg Inc., a micro-enterprise development organization that fights poverty and helps renew Winnipeg's inner city. He was also the founding President of Opportunities For Employment Inc., a Winnipeg organization that assists welfare recipients make the transition from welfare to work. Garry is currently Board Chair of Assiniboine Credit Union in Winnipeg.

Garry lives in Winnipeg with his wife Teri, surrounded by his children, grandchildren and extended family.

## Assistance

Garry would like to thank Anne Makhoul, Laura Zikovic, Mark Cabaj and Eric Leviten-Reid, for their assistance with the ideas and preparation of this resource.

**A Comprehensive Approach to  
Poverty Using Strategic Drivers**

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## What is the strategic driver technique?

*The Strategic Driver Approach* is a technique to assist people interested in adopting a comprehensive approach to reducing poverty to think and act more holistically when developing strategies.

## Potential Context for Use

- To help a group visualize the relationships between elements of a comprehensive approach to reducing poverty.
- To identify inter-related areas of activities and confirm the sequence in which activities are planned and implemented.
- To surface different areas of outcome expectations and to guide subsequent discussions on measures and monitoring.

## Guiding ideas

- Deep and durable reductions in poverty are only possible if the inter-related causes underlying a person or community's poverty are addressed.
- Comprehensive, multi-faceted initiatives are more likely than single purpose programs to produce deep and durable change.
- It can be very challenging to be comprehensive from the outset of a social change initiative.
- By creating strategic entry points within a more comprehensive framework, collaborations can progress toward comprehensiveness in stages.

## Comprehensiveness

There are many reasons underlying someone's poverty. In his book on the "working poor", David Shipler describes the situation of many families working but struggling to get by on low incomes. He has a nice quotation that illustrates the interwoven nature of the issues they face.

"Every problem," he says, "magnifies the impact of the others, and all are so tightly interlocked that one reversal can produce a chain reaction with results far distant from the original causes. A rundown apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing."

Then Shipler says,

"If problems are interlocking then so too solutions must be [...]: a job alone is not enough. Medical insurance alone is not enough. Good housing alone is not enough. Reliable transportation, careful family budgeting, effective parenting, effective schooling are not enough when each is achieved in isolation from the rest."

It is relatively easy to agree that poverty can only be addressed by comprehensive solutions. It is much more difficult to plan and implement comprehensive initiatives. Discovering the interconnections between the various factors, finding the resources to work in multi-faceted ways, getting partners from the various sectors to work together and managing complex processes all make the effort challenging.

Working comprehensively is both imperative and yet seemingly impossible. Effective initiatives tend to be those able to operate at two levels at the same time, focusing on where they are and continuously reaching out to integrate more issues, strategies and partners.

## Approaches to Comprehensiveness

The Tamarack Institute has identified several different ways of approaching comprehensiveness that are based on and adapted from the research by the Aspen Institute's Roundtable for Community Change. These are:

1. **Comprehensive From The Outset** – Members of a collaboration may elect to work on a broad range of issues related to poverty (e.g. housing, employment, etc.) and/or a broad cross section of groups experiencing high rates of poverty (e.g. immigrants, working poor, etc). Example: The Core Area Neighborhood Council in Saskatoon, which at one time was working on 62 strategies in 13 goal areas (e.g. expanding access to employment programs, improving commercial activity in neighborhoods, etc.)
2. **Strategic Drivers** – Where the initial focus is on one or a few areas or issues and the effort expands over time as the group's capacity evolves. Example: The Quality of Life CHALLENGE in Victoria initially identified three key areas in which to focus their poverty reduction efforts: paid work, affordable housing, and social connections.
3. **Opportunity Driven** – The emphasis is on promoting a comprehensive agenda by responding to good opportunities as they emerge. Example: The people and organizations involved in Vibrant Communities Calgary have developed initiatives to address income support programs, transportation subsidies and employer wages as and when opportunities to change policies in these areas have presented themselves.
4. **Hybrid** – a combination of the “Strategic Driver and Opportunity Driven” approaches - A group selects several areas of potential high impacts and reserves some capacity to respond to good opportunities to make an impact in other areas as they arise. Example: In 2001, Opportunities Waterloo Region shifted from a pure opportunity-driven approach to one that sought to invest approximately two-thirds of the group's energy on initiatives related to the working poor and at-risk youth population and kept approximately one-third of their resources free to address any type of opportunities to reduce poverty in the region as they emerged.

All these approaches require that members of a collaboration seeking to reduce poverty:

- think comprehensively about the issue
- analyze and look for connections amongst root causes
- explore a large range of potential solutions to address these causes.

The distinct feature of the strategic driver approach is the manageable manner in which members of a collaboration think about, design and implement a comprehensive approach, expanding participation and priorities over time as their capacity to do so emerges organically.

## An Illustration

In the late 1990s, the North End Housing Project in Winnipeg (NEHP) identified affordable housing as a high priority. The quality of housing stock in the City's north end was low and rapidly deteriorating. Many homes were abandoned. Many were being set on fire by vandals. Vacant lots were beginning to appear all over the neighbourhood.

NEHP wanted to create a larger inventory of better housing stock, but they knew that their project was about more than creating better houses. The social conditions in the community were deteriorating. Violence and vandalism were escalating. If there was to be a market for NEHP's newly-built or renovated houses, some work would need to be done to make the community a more attractive place in which to live. Also, NEHP wanted to avoid unleashing a process of gentrification: they wanted people from the community, especially people on limited incomes to live in the new houses, rather than wealthier people with little to no connection to the neighborhood, who would be attracted by comparatively inexpensive housing.

In response, members of NEHP chose to create a “development system”, a set of interlocking institutional capacities for addressing the multifaceted needs of a community, using physical housing rehabilitation as their strategic driver. The development system is shown in Illustration 1 below:

The development system begins with NEHP's primary goal – **physical housing renewal** – in the middle of the page. NEHP was eager to use physical housing renewal as a catalyst for **community renewal**. To achieve that, it needed first to **cluster** the physical housing renewal work into certain neighbourhoods. There were 11,000 households in the north end of Winnipeg. If NEHP dispersed a housing renewal program throughout the whole neighbourhood, it would not be able to create a critical mass of improved houses anywhere, and the social conditions in the neighbourhood would put the renewed houses at risk of soon deteriorating, as their predecessors had done. By clustering their physical housing renewal on certain streets, NEHP was able to create enough critical mass on those streets to change the social dynamics.

Clustering the houses also made it possible to build **social capital** among residents in these developments. NEHP hired a community development worker who helped organize **resident associations** and assisted them in implementing **community garden** programs. The community development worker was also able to contribute to the **safety** of the community by assisting residents in setting up **block parent** and **citizen street patrols**.

Housing redevelopment is expensive. It has significant **economic spin-offs**. NEHP wanted to make sure as many of those spin-offs as possible went to local people and local businesses. At first NEHP tried to achieve this by favouring renovation and construction contractors who would commit to **hiring their labourers locally**. NEHP soon found that the contractors would not live up to their commitments. They might make an effort to hire locally, but would give up as soon as they encountered difficulty recruiting qualified local workers. NEHP then collaborated with a partner organization to establish a social enterprise which would hire locally. NEHP awarded the contracts for the renovation and construction work to this new enterprise that – in addition to hiring locally - **purchased as many locally-manufactured materials and supplies as possible**. That purchasing decision created other local economic spin-offs.

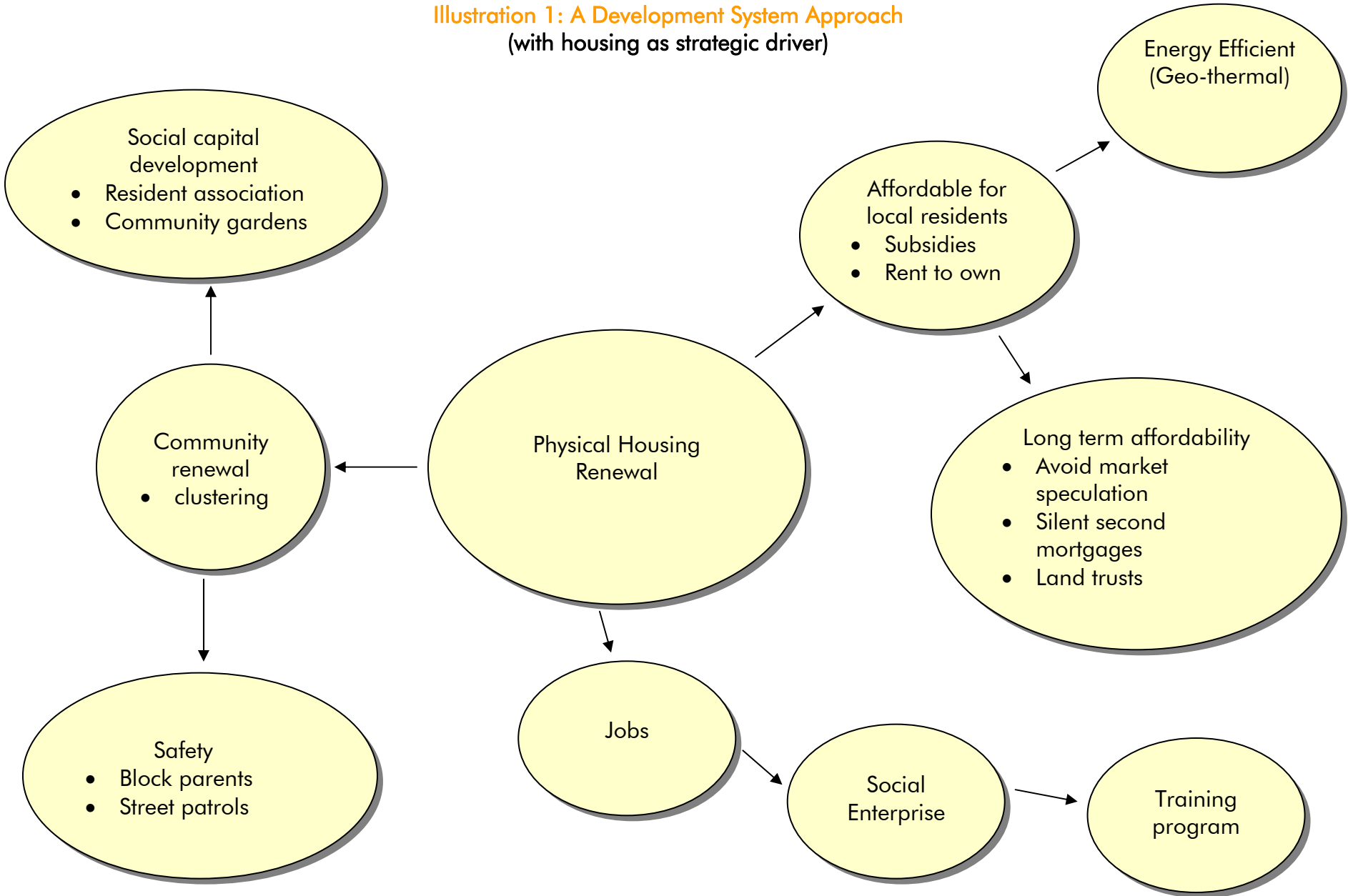
Before long the social enterprise was experiencing the same difficulty the private sector contractors had been having: They had difficulty recruiting trained, reliable workers. Its solution was to partner with a local community-based organization to develop a **carpentry training program**. The training program created a labour pool for the social enterprise, while at the same time building the **human capital** of neighborhood residents.

As indicated earlier, NEHP wanted to make sure the newly-renovated houses were **affordable for neighbourhood residents**. Housing prices were quite depressed in Winnipeg's north end when NEHP started its work. As a result, NEHP was able to buy up properties at very low prices. It was also able to obtain substantial **subsidies** from municipal, provincial and federal housing programs, which it used to further reduce the prices it needed to charge the new homeowners. NEHP also initiated a **rent-to-own** program that allowed would-be homeowners to rent their homes for the first five years. At the end of that period, the rent portion that had been used to pay down the principal on the mortgage would be counted as equity. Prospective homeowners would then be able to purchase their homes using the equity as a down payment. A housing organization with a similar program in a neighbouring community made houses even more affordable by creating a **community land trust** which was intended to control upward price movement as the community became more stable.

One subset of the NEHP houses incorporated a long-term affordability (and environmental) feature by using environmental grants to build **energy-efficient homes**. The grants were used to build geothermal heating/cooling systems within an affordable housing project.

The NEHP designed a comprehensive development system with housing as the strategic driver. Many other drivers could have been used, including employment training, recreation, child care, education, social enterprise development and community gardens. All of these have the potential to be used as the strategic drivers around which a comprehensive approach is developed.

Illustration 1: A Development System Approach  
(with housing as strategic driver)



## How to Use the Strategic Driver Technique

Illustration 2 below provides a blank template that you can use to complete a strategic driver planning exercise. Illustration 3 incorporates much of the NEHP story to provide an example of a completed template with housing as the strategic driver.

There are a variety of ways to use the template. Following is one way:

1. Identify an **issue** related to the poverty challenge your group wants to address. This may be related to the poverty of a population (e.g. inadequate income from public sector for seniors) or a geographical location (e.g. a neighborhood). Define the topic as clearly as possible on a card, flip chart, or sheet on a wall. This is your ‘strategic driver’.
2. Place the card on a wall or flip chart and draw a circle around it as in illustration 2. If you are not sure which strategic driver to use, complete step 3 first. Then complete step 3 for a number of different strategic drivers. This will generate different ‘**strategic driver options**’ from which to select.
3. Agree on the range of **outcomes** you would like to produce<sup>1</sup>. Place one **outcome category** in each of the circles surrounding the centre circle.
4. For each **outcome category**, identify one or more **initiatives** (related to your strategic driver) that you could implement to achieve that outcome. It will be helpful to identify both programmatic and systems change initiatives.
5. Decide which of the initiatives to start working on first and which need to wait for later<sup>2</sup>. At the completion of this exercise you will have the advantage of having conceptualized an overall approach, with the ability to implement it as your resources and other conditions allow. Some groups may find that they need to complete all or part of step 6 before they can decide which initiatives to prioritize for early implementation.
6. Develop detailed plans for each initiative, including design, resource requirements, potential funders, potential partners etc.

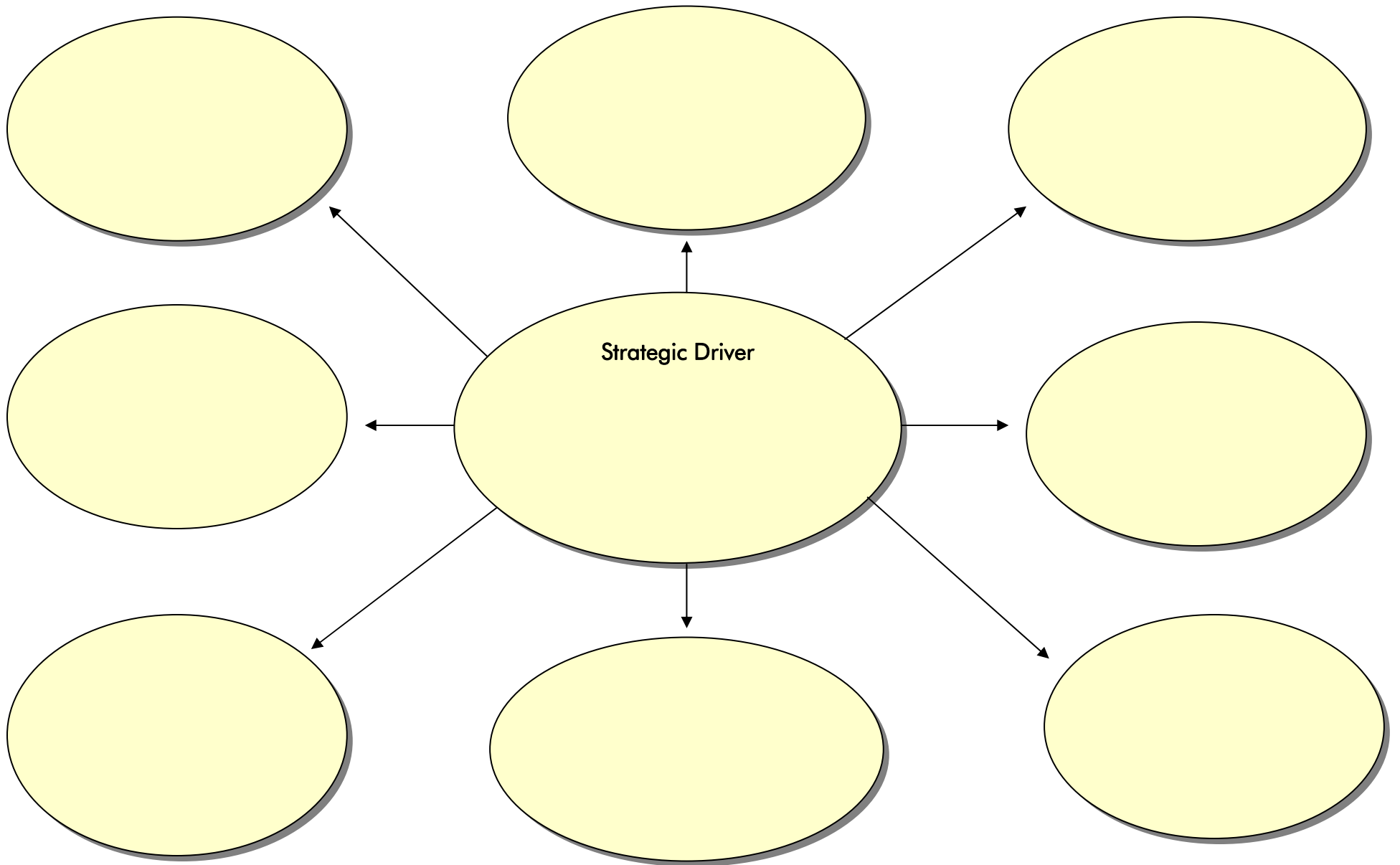
*For a description of 147 initiatives to address poverty please see Tamarack’s Poverty Compendium Resource at: [http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/Poverty\\_Reduction\\_GL\\_042209.pdf](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/Poverty_Reduction_GL_042209.pdf)*

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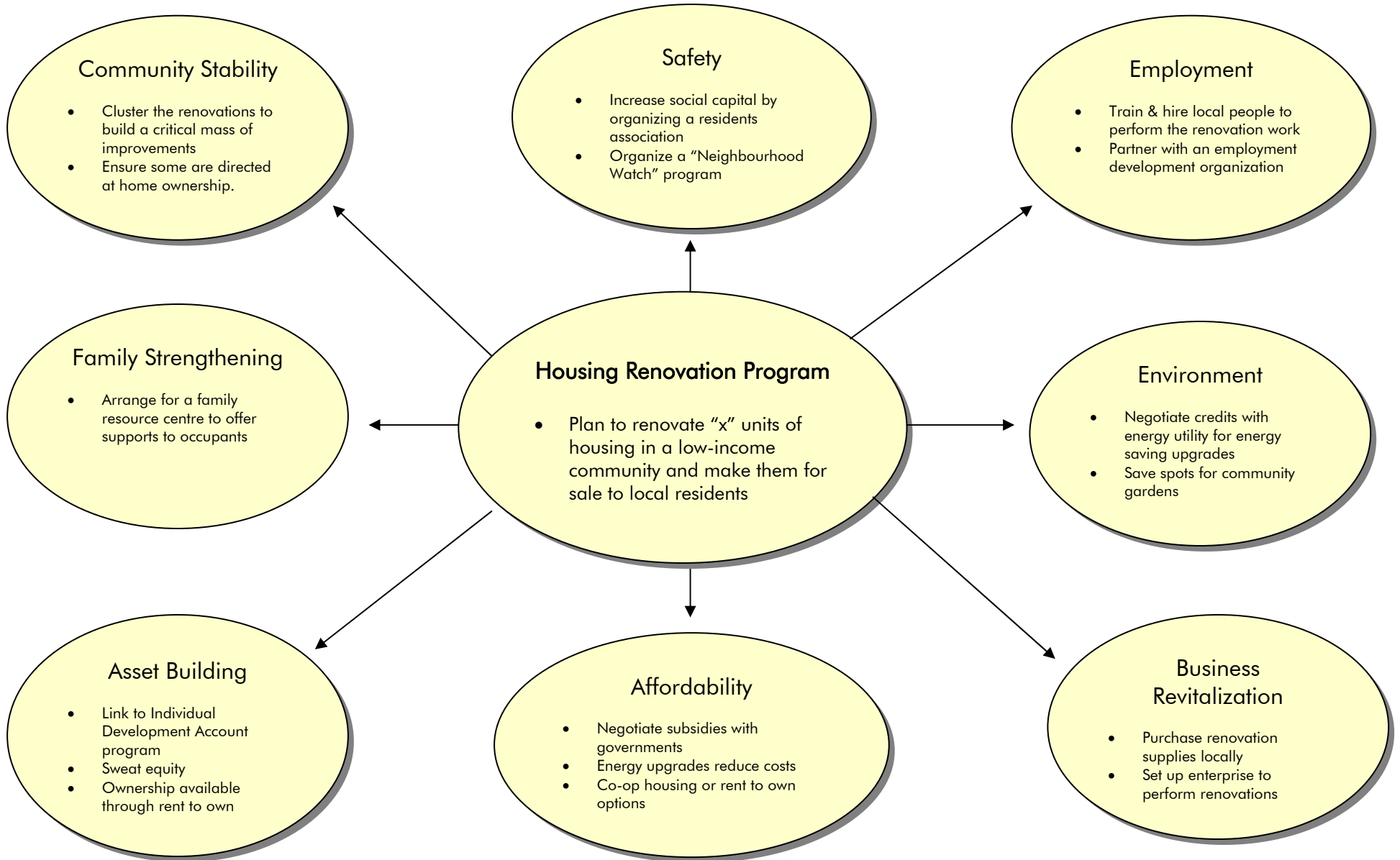
<sup>1</sup> See the following tools for assistance in developing the outcomes you would like to produce - [http://www.sas2.net/documents/tools/techniques/problem\\_tree.pdf](http://www.sas2.net/documents/tools/techniques/problem_tree.pdf)  
[http://www.sas2.net/documents/tools/techniques/ideal\\_scenario.pdf](http://www.sas2.net/documents/tools/techniques/ideal_scenario.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See the following tools for assistance in prioritizing initiatives - <http://www.sas2.net/documents/tools/allpurpose/ranking.pdf>  
<http://www.sas2.net/documents/tools/allpurpose/rating.pdf>

Illustration 2: A Development System Approach  
(using a strategic driver as a starting point)



**Illustration 3: A Development System Approach**  
 (using a housing renovation program as the strategic driver)



## A Further Refinement

Sherrí Torjman of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy has argued that communities must work in four clusters of activity to achieve healthy communities, and that they must do so in ways that create linkages between each of the clusters<sup>3</sup>.

The four clusters of activity are:

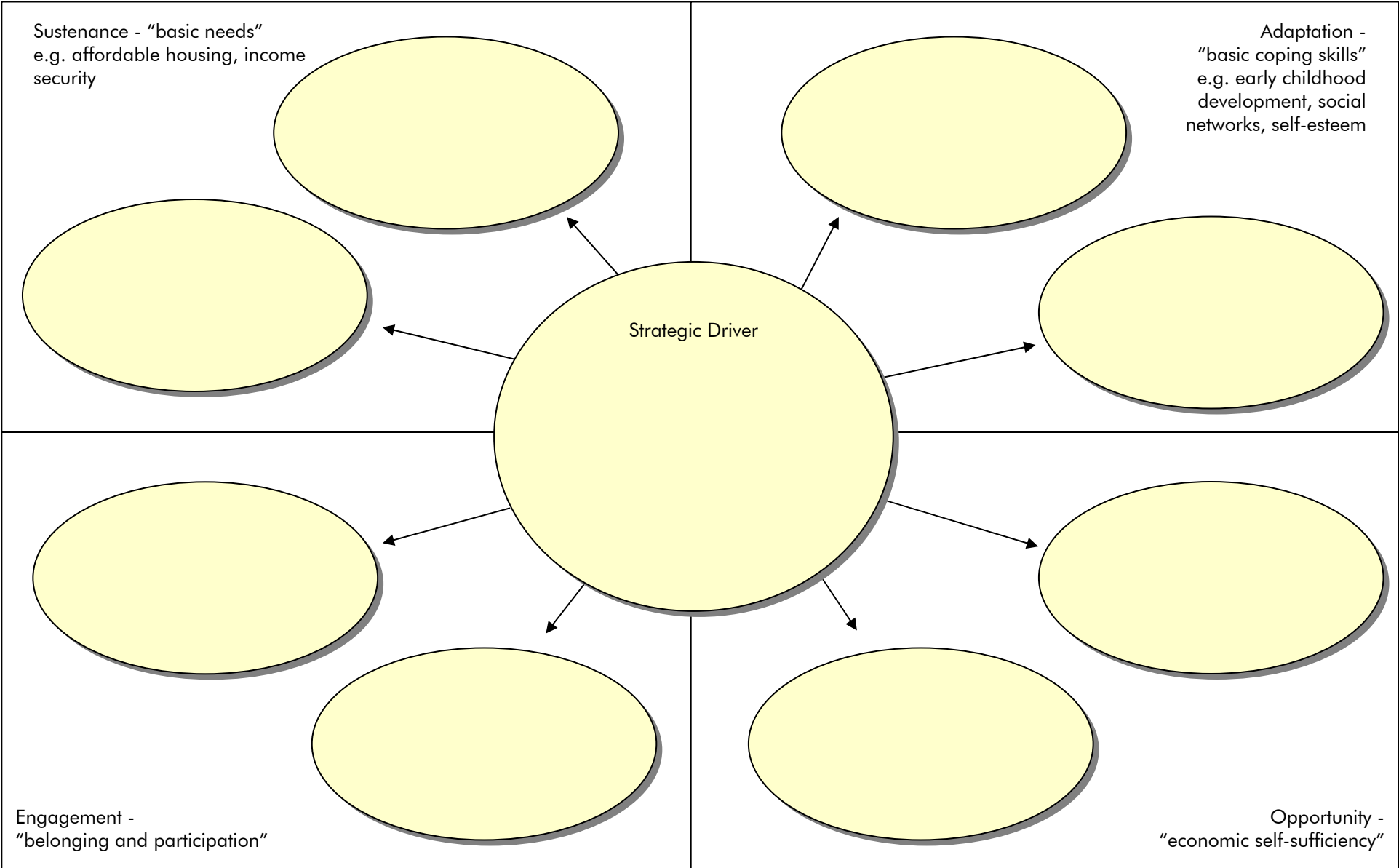
1. Sustenance – providing basic needs. This involves initiatives such as:
  - a. Food security
  - b. Decent affordable housing
  - c. Income security
2. Adaptation – developing basic coping skills to survive in a complex world, e.g.
  - a. Early childhood development
  - b. Social networks – to help build self-esteem, empathy and problem-solving capacity
  - c. Literacy
3. Engagement – to help individuals develop a sense of where they belong so that they become active agents in their own lives and in society generally, e.g.
  - a. Cultural expression
  - b. Empowerment
  - c. Meaningful participation in
    - i. The arts
    - ii. Recreation
    - iii. Decision making
4. Opportunity – from an economic perspective
  - a. Employability
  - b. Job creation
  - c. Asset building
  - d. Ownership

The above analysis is useful and can be incorporated into the strategic driver template. The “outcomes” circles in Illustration 4 have been grouped into four quadrants, one for each of the four clusters. The cluster descriptions are helpful prompts for identifying potential initiatives, and the completed template will provide an overview of which clusters have been adequately addressed and those that have not.

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<sup>3</sup> “Shared Space: The Communities Agenda”

**Illustration 4: A Development System Approach**  
(using a strategic driver as a starting point)



## Possible Adjustments to the Technique

### *Simpler Versions*

- Develop only one strategic driver option.

### *More Advanced Versions*

- Take more time to gather information for each of the strategic driver options (e.g. research on outcomes, ideas from other communities, local interest).
- Have different groups complete the exercise and compare the results.
- Rate each strategic driver option using a structured technique. Some of these can be found at [www.sas2.net](http://www.sas2.net).

## Reading and Links

Loewen, Garry. 2009. *A Compendium of Poverty Strategies and Frameworks*. Tamarack- An Institute for Community Engagement. Waterloo, Ontario.

Kubisch, Anne C., Patricia Auspos, Prudence Brown, Robert Chaskin, Karen Fulbright-Anderson, Ralph Hamilton. 2002. *Voices from the Field II: Reflections on Comprehensive Community Change*. The Aspen Institute, New York, New York.

SAS2: *Social Analysis Tools*: [www.sas2.net/en/tools/tools-introduction/](http://www.sas2.net/en/tools/tools-introduction/)

Shieler, David K. 2006. *Working Poor: Invisible in America*. Alfred A. Knopf. New York.



