



Summary of 2009-2011 Evaluation Effort

This evaluation process focuses on the Vibrant Communities (VC) experience and the impact of this comprehensive, place-based approach to poverty reduction from the perspective of the 12 local communities and Vibrant Communities Canada at the pan-Canadian level. For more information on Vibrant Communities, see <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2.php>.

The intent of the evaluation effort is to provide learning about the effects of communities participating in VC on poverty reduction, and the overall effectiveness of the approach so that it may inform other social change initiatives.

The evaluation effort is organized around a 'utilization-focused' approach, concerned with improving the probabilities of the evaluation findings will result in the intended use by intended users. (See <http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/ufe.pdf>). The entire evaluation effort is guided by four principles.

1. **Shaped by Primary Intended Users.** The primary intended users of the evaluation will develop the questions and shape the purposes to which the answers of those questions will be used. The primary users include local communities and funders and policy makers interested in place-based efforts to reduced poverty. The secondary users include the current staff and sponsors of Vibrant Communities.
2. **Participatory Sense-Making.** Where and when possible, relevant intended users will participate in efforts to interpret data, draw conclusions and make judgments.
3. **Two Phases.** The first phase (December '09-May 2010) will use data already gathered locally and nationally or other 'easier to get' sources. A second round of evaluation (June 2010 to early 2011) will address new questions generated through phase one of the evaluation and to try to address questions which we unanswerable with existing data. It is expected that additional data collection will be required for this phase.
4. **Adaptive Design.** The methods for gathering, analyzing, interpreting and judging data will evolve to reflect emerging questions, the preferences and needs of stakeholders and the requirements of good research.

Jamie Gamble of Imprint Consulting Inc. was hired to facilitate the first round of the

evaluation in conjunction with an internal research team. In December 2009 and January 2010, Gamble interviewed a variety of stakeholders who were contacted for a telephone discussion about their general interest in the evaluation, and the sorts of questions they would like to see the summative evaluation consider. These included representatives from government, sponsors, participating communities, and organizations who apply similar approaches to their work.

Based on the input from the consultation, three overarching areas of inquiry have been identified:

1. What constitutes the VC model? For this area of focus, the evaluation intends to provide a clear articulation of what exactly constitutes the VC model. Prospective evaluation users seek to better understand the positive and constructive features of the VC approach, and have insights into which elements are essential and which are peripheral. Where this evaluation should ultimately lead is to assist readers to effectively consider some over-arching questions about VC as a form of social technology: What are the different manifestations of the VC principles? Is VC a model? Is it replicable (or what components are replicable)? How? Is the effort to create this complex local governance/collaboration in a community worth what you get in return? What are the implications for other funders/governments for supporting this kind of approach?

2. What is the performance of the VC approach with respect to poverty reduction? For this area of focus the evaluation shall explore the nature and scope of the poverty reduction impact achieved in the participating communities. Was the poverty reduction effect stronger in some communities? Is it possible to articulate why? What are the implications of different manifestations of the VC approach to poverty reduction outcomes?

3. What is the experience of applying the VC approach in different communities? For this area of focus, the evaluation seeks to inform an understanding of the different conditions in which the various manifestations of VC principles thrive and wither. What are the lessons about stimulating and supporting collaboration in communities? What are the key lessons about engagement with government, low-income residents, NGOs, and the business community? What are the benefits of supporting a peer learning community as part of the initiative?

Gamble and the research team are currently experimenting with different methods for ‘making sense’ of data available to answer each of the streams of questions.

Vibrant Communities Canada anticipates releasing preliminary evaluation briefs to the public in the summer and autumn of 2010 and final evaluation results in a series of evaluation briefs from early to late 2011.