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Centraide of Greater Montréal: A Case Study

by

**William Ninacs, with the collaboration of
Francine Gareau**

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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Centraide, actor for social development</i>	1
<i>The Centraide organizations</i>	1
<i>Centraide of Greater Montréal: some history</i>	2
<i>The 1990s shift</i>	3
<i>The focus on caring communities</i>	4
<i>The strategic study of social issues</i>	5
<i>Centraide and support for caring communities</i>	5
<i>The current context</i>	5
<i>Financial support for caring community action</i>	6
<i>The challenges for Centraide</i>	7
<i>Help build caring communities</i>	8
<i>Support for developing the potential of community action</i>	8
<i>Support for internal volunteer action</i>	9
<i>Promoting social cohesion</i>	10
<i>Neighbourhood roundtables and Vivre-Saint Michel en santé</i>	11
<i>The 1,2,3 GO! initiative</i>	12
<i>Conclusion</i>	13
<i>Endnotes</i>	14

Introduction

For the general public, the name ‘Centraide’ evokes an annual fundraising campaign – often the major campaign in the region – to assist people in need. Even if the era of posters illustrated with stark images of dire poverty is now a thing of the past, the idea that donations will be used to relieve the misery of those who are poor, lonely, ill or otherwise disadvantaged still persists. While this is not entirely false, in practice the amounts redistributed by Centraide are never given directly to individuals; they go instead to local community organizations to which these people belong or that deliver services to them. What Centraide ‘sells’ is community action – a very nebulous concept for ordinary mortals! Imagine the challenge of focusing a fundraising campaign on this concept. But this is precisely what Centraides in Québec do!

They do even more, because the Centraides do not see themselves solely as sources of funding, but also as social actors playing a decisive role for social change. A case study of one Centraide, Centraide of Greater Montréal, helps us understand how these basically philanthropic organizations try to meet the challenge of participating actively in building a fairer, more just society. Part of the explanation lies in the roots of Centraide of Greater Montréal, and part in the shift it made a few years ago to turn resolutely towards working for caring communities. This is how it was done.

Centraide, actor for social development

The Centraide organizations

There are currently 18 Centraide organizations in Québec, covering the entire territory. They are usually identified with the United Way organizations found throughout most of the rest of North America – 107 in Canada, and 1,400 in the United States. Internationally, the United Way is present in some 30 countries.¹ But there seems to be a philosophical difference between some United Ways and Centraides.

In a nutshell, the Centraides see themselves fundamentally as actors for social development, and not primarily as philanthropic agencies content to redistribute the funds they raise. This outlook has fairly significant practical consequences. For example, Centraides in Québec do not allow donors to earmark donations for a specific agency or project. According to Lyse Brunet, Vice-President for Social Development for Centraide of Greater Montréal, accepting earmarked gifts would make Centraide into a ‘mailbox’ and oblige the agencies seeking funds to lobby the donors to choose them. This would disadvantage organizations whose action is sometimes less popular but nonetheless crucial, such as tenants’ associations and welfare rights organizations. Ms. Brunet adds

that “the value-added of Centraides in Québec is their strategic choice in regard to poverty, that of a system of redistribution based on an analysis of needs and the resources to meet those needs.”

Centraide of Greater Montréal: some history

The ancestor of Centraide of Greater Montréal, the Federated Appeal of Greater Montréal, was created in 1966 by the merger of five philanthropic organizations that worked to collect and redistribute donations within the territories of the diocese of Montréal and Saint-Jean: the *Fédération des œuvres de charité canadiennes françaises*, the United Red Feather, the *Association des œuvres de santé*, the *Fédération et Conseil de bien-être de la Rive-Sud* and the Federation of Catholic Community Services.

The original goal of the merger was to respond to the business community, which wanted a single annual fundraising campaign. The first united campaign launched in April 1968 raised \$9 million, which was then redistributed to the federations on the basis of their relative size at the time of the merger. Each of these administered the redistribution of its share, but since the resources and capacity for action of the federations varied widely, it soon became clear that the public was ill-served by this system. As André Mailhot, first president and executive director, later explained: “The new philosophy of social development called for Centraide to focus on the neediest. And unfortunately, the majority of Montréal’s needy citizens were French Canadians and people from the ethnic communities – that is, the very people who would receive the smallest share of available funds under the existing system.”²

A few years later, the five federations thus decided to turn all their activities over to the Federated Appeal, which, in addition to conducting the fundraising campaign, from then on looked after redistributing funds and managing budgets. In May 1975, the Federated Appeal of Greater Montréal became Centraide Montréal and conducted its first campaign under this name.

But the five federations also wanted to give the Federated Appeal a very clear social mission. According to Louis Maheu, then vice-president of the *Fédération des œuvres de charité canadiennes-françaises*, the key was to go beyond the idea of a mere bank of services and funding to build an organization with a philosophy based on social development and self-help. “We decided to analyze allocation programs by major sector of intervention and not by agency. [...] We wanted to place the emphasis on personal responsibility and broad social problems, more than just direct assistance.”³ This is one aspect of the explanation for Centraide’s ongoing aspiration to link their action to social change.

Some observers see another part of the explanation in the cultural differences that are somewhat specific to Montréal. This is the case with Harold Thuringer, for example, who as executive

director piloted the merger and the ensuing creation of the new organization in 1974-75. He says: “Each federation made its special contribution: In the Anglophone community, volunteerism was more highly developed; in the Francophone community, the emergence of social work was creating more self-reliance among beneficiaries.”⁴ Ricardo Gill, a staff member when the Federated Appeal of Greater Montréal became Centraide and still part of the Centraide team today, concurs:

Each group had fairly different values. The anglophones were in favour of direct services to the population, whereas the francophones had a strong bias towards community development (social animation). It was necessary to define what Centraide should become while taking this into consideration, and to determine what balance Centraide’s allocation priorities should strike between the desire to ensure direct services and the tendency to favour community action.

The reference to community development is another clue. Drawing on French and US schools of practice, community development was a new approach that moved away from the approach of Christian charity and instead proposed social intervention focusing on the population’s participation in local community development. In the decade beginning in 1962, Québec proved to be especially fertile ground for experimenting with this approach in practically all areas of community life. All the Federated Appeals in Québec – and not just those in Greater Montréal – were inevitably influenced by the idea of participation that lies at the heart of the concept of social development.

All this meant that the first report on Centraide Montréal’s allocation priorities in 1976 gave priority to agencies emphasizing volunteer work, commitment and participation. Centraide supported community action by funding 111 community and volunteer agencies. In 1981, a second report set the priorities for the 1980s. While continuing to focus on volunteer work and participation, Centraide nevertheless adjusted its focus to favour solutions that promoted a comprehensive approach based on prevention and self-reliance – a policy direction that lasted roughly ten years.

The 1990s shift

But the 1980s saw a phenomenal increase in the number and variety of community organizations in Québec. At the same time, youth and women’s movements fuelled collective action, while growing and increasingly diversified immigration produced major culture shock. This was also the era of the emergence of community economic development in Québec, and the dynamic interaction of non-traditional players from grassroots and labour movements in the field of development gave rise to a host of new initiatives for social and economic self-reliance – community economic development corporations, community development corporations, training businesses and economic mutual aid group. After all, this was the decade that gave us the paradox of simultaneous creation of wealth and poverty, with exclusion upstaging exploitation and nonstandard, contingent forms of work beginning to outstrip regular, steady employment. It was a period of major upheavals throughout Québec, experienced with greater intensity in Montréal.

So it is not surprising that in the early 1990s, Centraide decided to do some new strategic thinking. This led to a new definition of its mission – which remains unchanged today:

To maximize financial and volunteer resources so that Centraide – particularly through the funding of and in partnership with community agencies – can promote mutual aid, social commitment and self-reliance as effective means of improving the quality of life in our community, especially for its neediest members.

At the same time, Centraide created a Social Trends Analysis Committee composed of about 20 leaders from the public and private sectors, academic and religious circles, and community and labour movements. In its report, “Entering the ‘90s,” the Committee identified a number of social challenges – the aging of the population, the growing presence of cultural communities within the territory, changes in family structures, and problems caused by unemployment and growing poverty. The Committee also examined one other aspect, namely the volunteer and community sector, since it is by supporting agencies that Centraide can intervene on social problems identified by the Committee. In addition to becoming increasingly numerous and active, volunteer and community organizations were receiving public recognition, particularly through their participation in the Harnois Commission on mental health and the Rochon Commission on health care and social services. Given the ever-greater needs, the proliferation of agencies raised the issue of whether agencies should be consolidated to allow for sounder management and greater effectiveness, while preserving their autonomy. This was henceforth a central concern for Centraide.

The focus on caring communities

But poverty continued to grow steadily. From 1991 to 1996, for example, the proportion of people living under the low income cut-off in the Greater Montréal area rose from 22 percent to 27.3 percent – or 893,000 people. The gap between rich and poor widened, and new areas of poverty emerged in some affluent municipalities.

Given this context, by September 1997 Centraide was again engaged in a strategic planning process, this time with the help of a team from the *Hautes Études Commerciales* school of business administration. Their strategic thinking drew on comments from 48 public opinion leaders from all walks of life in Montréal, as well as various analyses and studies. The end result was that Centraide reaffirmed its 1992 mission while seeking to continue contributing to core funding for agencies in its network.

Beyond this, though, Centraide adopted a general policy of focusing on its role of bringing people together. This stemmed in part from a much more comprehensive conception of poverty: “... the less fortunate include not only people who are economically poor (lack of assets), but also those who live in a state of cultural poverty (lack of identity) and of social and political poverty (lack

of power).”⁵ This policy direction was based on a new vision of how to combat poverty: building caring communities – i.e., building bridges among all citizens around a common theme, a network of mutual aid, regardless of political allegiances, religion or economic interests. This meant making use of volunteers not just for the fundraising campaign, not just on the allocations committees, but also in the heart of the action, in the groups, with the assistance of agencies specialized in volunteer action.

It followed that community action became the driving force in Centraide’s activities. In practice, this meant encouraging local communities to take charge, promoting community action to donors and the community, and enhancing the effectiveness of agencies’ initiatives by providing them with management support. In other words, Centraide would henceforth make the consolidation and development of community agencies and processes revolving around the empowerment of populations and local communities in need the focus of both its fundraising campaign and its grant allocations.

The strategic study of social issues

But how were these objectives to be translated into action? Centraide had to develop means and tools to guide its choices in light of community needs and community support. To develop a clearer understanding of its role, in 2000 Centraide more or less repeated the work done a decade earlier by inviting 19 leaders from various walks of life and movements in Greater Montréal to reflect together on current challenges and the most appropriate solutions and orientations. A Strategic Study process was organized, involving consultations, analyses and discussion groups to stimulate thinking and draw on contributions from representatives of social and community groups, the labour movement and political and financial circles. This Strategic Study lasted six months and led to the adoption of a key report, “Building Caring Communities and Supporting their Ability to Act,” which guides most of Centraide’s actions today.

Centraide and support for caring communities

The current context

Centraide’s territory covers the Greater Montréal area, which has 45 municipalities with a population of close to three million people living in three different regions: the Island of Montréal; Laval and part of the North Shore; and part of the South Shore in the Montérégie region.

In its 2002 fundraising campaign, Centraide of Greater Montréal succeeded in reaching out to and mobilizing 200,000 donors and 22,000 volunteers around mutual aid. More than \$41 million was raised, and more than \$31 million distributed to agencies and projects in Centraide's network in the Greater Montréal area. The Centraide of Greater Montréal campaign ranked first among Centraide campaigns in Québec for the amount raised, and second in Canada behind the United Way of Greater Toronto.

Financial support for community action

Where does the money go? At the present time (2002-03), Centraide provides support to some 280 community agencies and 46 concerted action initiatives within its territory. Generally speaking, it favours agencies that foster self-reliance of individuals and families, prevention, the establishment of mutual aid networks and volunteer work as well as the pooling of strengths and resources. More specifically, to obtain funding, an agency must be legally incorporated as a nonprofit organization, be recognized as a charitable organization by the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency and operate within the territory covered by Centraide of Greater Montréal. Moreover, it must be run by a board of directors composed of volunteers who are representative of the community that it serves, focus on a disadvantaged segment of the population, and work actively at implementing lasting solutions in an approach based on autonomy and self-reliance. It must also make use of volunteers at all levels of its operations.

Allocations committees assess and analyze applications from organizations as well as the relevance and effectiveness of their action. The committees are composed of volunteers from institutional, community, religious, labour and financial circles, assisted by advisors from the Centraide team and divided up on the basis of the following themes drawn from the work of the Strategic Study of Social Issues:

- support for inclusion: community organizations that work with the marginalized using strategies focused on prevention and people's empowerment as well as integrating them into the community by responding to basic needs and offering education, awareness raising, job-readiness and advocacy activities
- support for families: agencies that provide support for families through strategies focused on access to family services, strengthening ties between families and school, involving fathers, mutual aid among families, preventive work with children and youth, and summer camps
- support for living conditions: community organizations meeting individuals' basic needs – e.g., food, housing, income, physical health

- support for neighbourhood life: resources to support communities through strategies focused on social participation (social development) and the creation of significant places of affiliation (for seniors, women, mixed clientele) and that offer recreational, cultural, educational and advocacy activities
- support for volunteer action: agencies that promote volunteering, either by recruiting volunteers for other community resources or by matching volunteers with people with mental health problems or physical or intellectual disabilities
- support for developing the potential of community action: training resources as well as projects that help improve how community organizations work and expand their impact
- support for community development: resources for mobilizing to implement concerted actions aimed at improving people's quality of life around specific issues, be it the welfare of young children or the integration of cultural communities.

The allocations committees do not make the final decisions. They send their recommendations to the Allocations and Agency Relations Committee (AARC). Composed of the presidents of each of the allocations committees plus five other volunteers, the AARC's mandate is to make recommendations to the Board of Directors on grants to agencies. The idea is to enable the Board of Directors to provide real political leadership for Centraide. In 2000, for example, the Board of Directors adopted specific orientations on food security, considering that it was necessary to go beyond emergency stopgap assistance and help people become more autonomous by supporting, for example, community gardens and community kitchens. But it is the AARC that does the work of matching what the allocations committees need for the organizations corresponding to their respective themes with the financial resources available following the annual campaign.

The challenges for Centraide

There are also certain challenges for Centraide not only as an agency but as a philanthropic agency. Thus, in its Strategic Study of Social Issues, Centraide identified three basic strategic directions that underpin its own structures and interventions.

Help build caring communities

At the heart of this strategy is raising awareness of the poverty that exists in the Greater Montréal area and the solutions based on community action that are implemented to support individual and community efforts to overcome poverty. The methods used are varied – talks to businesses, neighbourhood visits with donors, messages for the general public, participation by groups of employees in mutual aid days and work bees for agencies, among others.

But Centraide also has to reach out to and educate donors, who are increasingly solicited for all kinds of causes that are important to them. Individual donations are still Centraide's leading source of revenue – 151,500 donations in 2002 for a total of \$23,563,000 – of which \$19,221,000 was through payroll deductions. This means that the way Centraide 'sells' its product – community action – to the public is of considerable importance. Its approach must be working, because the value of the average donation rises each year.

In the same vein, Centraide certainly does not take for granted the corporate donations that account for 32 percent of funds raised. In fact, retaining the continued support of the approximately 45 corporate donors who contributed more than \$13 million in 2001 is a considerable challenge, because organizations like the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy (CCP) frequently encourage them to develop direct partnerships with community organizations. (From the other end, publications like the CCP's *Creating Effective Partnerships with Business: A Guide for Charities and Nonprofits in Canada* encourage community organizations to focus their funding strategies on developing partnerships with business.) Businesses have to stand out from the competition, and one way of doing so is to adopt a cause. But since Centraide of Greater Montréal – like the other Centraide organizations in Québec – refuses to accept earmarked gifts, it has to go beyond 'simply' raising the awareness of its corporate donors and educate them on the validity of its approach based on community action as a whole. Centraide tries to do this by making corporate donors more knowledgeable about the role and dynamics of the community agencies it supports, which helps give tangible meaning to the donation while promoting community action.

Support for developing the potential of community action

For Centraide, developing the potential of community action requires capacity-building with the organizations at work in the field. This means that its support role must be translated into funding that enables community organizations to consolidate their activities and develop others. Centraide has therefore deliberately chosen to subsidize *fewer* agencies so as to provide what it considers to be a more adequate level of funding for the community organizations that it does fund. Thus, apart from the neighbourhood round tables (where Centraide is not the only source of funds), 223 agencies and initiatives – or about 75 percent of the 305 accepted for 2002-03 – received more

than \$50,000. As well, these grants come as part of a three-year contract in most cases. On the one hand, this allows the agency to do medium-range planning, and on the other it allows Centraide to establish an ongoing relationship with the agency and help equip the latter to work strategically and assess its work rigorously.

This is, of course, a real challenge for the team of advisors. They must not only understand the issues and problems in their sector of work, but also stay on the leading edge of knowledge about best practices and tools available to support community agencies.

As for the thorny issue of the real impact of community action, Centraide has not yet found indicators or measures that are satisfactory for it or for the agencies that it supports. It is also true that the situation is complex. On the one hand, the target – poverty – is multidimensional, involving the lack of assets, identity and power set out in Centraide’s definition, as well as an incremental accumulation of multiple deficits as described in the research on impoverishment and social exclusion. On the other hand, the method – community action – strives to set in motion collective work processes that may often be just as important to building caring communities as are the immediate results on a specific problem. This said, Centraide plans to carry out pilot projects next fall to better identify the various aspects of the problem of evaluating the activities of its network of agencies.

Internal support for volunteering

Centraide of Greater Montréal has a long tradition of sustained work with volunteers, be it in its own administration, the fundraising campaign, the allocation of resources or activities undertaken from time to time, such as strategic planning or identifying issues. Centraide would, in fact, like to involve volunteers in *all* its activities by encouraging the pooling of their experience, expertise and skills. To achieve this, it is developing partnerships with volunteer bureaus and trying to make better use of volunteer commitment within its own organization. Some figures suggest that it is doing so quite successfully:⁶

- Its Board of Directors is composed of some 30 volunteers (with the exception of the president and executive director).
- The various committees reporting to the Board of Directors are also composed of volunteers, and there is even a volunteer committee to oversee the recruitment of other volunteers.
- The examination of applications from agencies for funding, the evaluation of their work and the recommendations on the amounts to be allocated are all done by volunteer committees involving a total of more than 80 people.

- The annual campaign relies on some 22,000 volunteers. In fact, the campaign cabinet and the volunteer committees in the various sectors (e.g., trade, pharmaceutical industry, health and social services) include about 200 people who open doors for Centraide in the business community to obtain their contribution and cooperation, including that of conducting campaigns with employees. In each of approximately 2,800 workplaces, volunteers are in charge of organizing the employee campaign and soliciting their co-workers.

And of course, these figures do not include the 40,000 volunteers mobilized by the agencies funded by Centraide, or the 200 spokespersons of agencies who meet with donors in the workplace to explain how donations to Centraide are used.

Promoting social cohesion

This approach focused on community action and directed towards the development of caring communities has in recent years inevitably led Centraide to take more interest in communities as a whole. Indeed, Centraide has taken on the mandate of developing a better understanding of the social dynamics of the neighbourhoods that it serves so as to provide them with more effective support and thereby better target its investments.

Centraide therefore recently undertook to develop neighbourhood profiles, learning about their history, geography, living environment, economic situation and population. These profiles foster a more territorial understanding of problems and allow for much more extensive assessment work, providing support to agencies located in areas of poverty that have very little in the way of resources. Contrary to all expectations, this exercise intended primarily for internal information purposes has become a tool for bringing people together, because Centraide provides the neighbourhood profiles to volunteer committees, the allocation committees, local resource people and agencies and, of course, to its own staff. Better knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of local communities create significant internal cohesion, as Ms. Brunet points out: “It puts life in our vision, it becomes very concrete. It creates a kind of cement, and plays an extraordinary role in creating coherent action!”

Cohesion within Centraide is vital, but it is equally vital in the neighbourhoods that it serves. This is probably why Centraide supports joint involvement and mobilization initiatives in a number of communities within its territory, notably around issues like early childhood development, access to services for people from different cultural communities and social development. In recent years, funding for concerted action initiatives has risen from \$486,816 in 1996 to \$2.7 million in 2002, amounts that Centraide describes as “venture capital in innovative practices.”

Realizing that pooling the forces of agencies and their partners can enhance their impact in the community, Centraide supports a number of territory-based projects focusing on concerted action by the various actors and social movements. Here are a few examples.

Neighbourhood roundtables and Vivre Saint-Michel en santé

Twenty local roundtables are funded in the context of a partnership between the City of Montréal, the Public Health Department of the Regional Health and Social Services Board of Montréal-Centre and Centraide of Greater Montréal. The purpose of the partnership is to support multisectoral action with a view to social development. The *Vivre Saint-Michel en santé* roundtable is a good illustration of the dynamics sustained here.

Saint-Michel is a multicultural district – 41 percent of its 57,309 inhabitants were born outside the country. It is also poor; the unemployment rate is 19 percent, and 58 percent of families with children under 18 live on income security benefits. The *Vivre Saint-Michel en santé* project (VSMS – For a healthy Saint-Michel) was launched in the spring of 1991 after consultations with local residents in a community forum that brought together 200 representatives of agencies and citizens, who set up ten action committees to carry out specific projects. So right from the start, VSMS has been a neighbourhood process in which the entire community is invited to participate, and it has also served as an incubator for projects aimed at reducing inequality and exclusion.

VSMS is a fairly small group whose formal structure is composed of about 15 institutional agencies and community groups as well as a few citizens, although the entire community, and not just the formal members, is invited to its annual general meeting. In fact, VSMS's legal structure is less important than the Development Committee that it has set up. The Development Committee is necessarily composed of five citizens elected by the general meeting and the heads of the working committees, as well as any agency or institution in the neighbourhood that wishes to belong to it. The Committee meets at least five times a year and plays the role of an intersectoral round table to facilitate the implementation of projects with three basic goals:

- developing employment by sponsoring an employability intake and referral service and an association of business people, and developing a social economy enterprise
- attenuating the effects of poverty through various food security projects such as the creation of a public market, the organization of a collective purchasing network, the development of a multi-service resource centre that would include a '*Partage*' store, a food bank, nutritional information, local recycling and facilitation of better coordination among existing resources

- closer inter-cultural relations by working with other neighbourhood organizations, including the *Cirque du Soleil*, to organize a number of public activities (International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Black History Month, International Women's Day, Québec Citizenship Week) and by establishing a permanent cultural resource centre in the neighbourhood.

Various VSMS committees and sub-committees oversee more or less directly, as the case may be, the success of the projects and the necessary funding arrangements. Centraide's contribution is fairly modest – \$10,000 in 2002-03. The other partners (City of Montréal, Public Health Department) contribute too, but what is most important is that a number of the projects are self-financing, and over the years some of them have become independent agencies, several of them now supported by Centraide.

As the VSMS pamphlet says:

After eight years, VSMS has successfully met the challenge of action. It has left a lasting mark on community life in the neighbourhood. The different areas of work have not all progressed as well as we would have liked... While patiently continuing to steer towards [its] goals, VSMS has [often] altered its strategy, leaving the centre stage to its partners and passing the test of maturity without causing splits.⁷

These are wise lessons for anyone who wants to enhance social cohesion and mutual aid in his or her community.

The 1,2,3 GO! initiative

Launched in 1995, *1,2,3 GO!* is a project aimed at giving children from ages 0 to 3 a good start in life through various activities organized by citizens in the community. So far, this initiative has been introduced in six areas where there are large numbers of young children with substantial needs. Its implementation required support from community leaders, and in this regard Centraide of Greater Montréal played a role in bringing people together and securing the private funding needed to start up the project without dipping into the funds raised in its annual campaign.

1,2,3 GO! is not an agency that offers services. It is an initiative that mobilizes the community around child development. Each territory has its own projects, reflecting its situation and needs. Parents are invited to play an active part in *1,2,3 GO!*, and ways of encouraging their participation are built in – child care, meeting times adapted to their realities and assistance with transportation. Parent committees are set up so that parents can discuss their needs, define directions for programming of activities and participate in management. They are provided with regular support to develop their ability to put forward their points of view. These parent committees have been the starting point for projects like toy-lending services or alternative forms of child care which, once

launched, often become independent agencies, sometimes managed by the parents themselves. Since its inception, *1,2,3 GO!* has reached more than 3,000 children and their parents.

In 2002, Centraide maintained its involvement by overseeing the founding of the *1,2,3 GO! Centre*. This is a resource and support agency devoted entirely to the promotion, training and development of all aspects of early childhood work throughout Québec. On October 22, 2002, Michèle Thibodeau-DeGuire, President and Executive Director of Centraide, told a press conference: “Since 1995, these neighbourhoods have undertaken various actions and processes thanks to a vast partnership that has fostered a pooling of resources, skills and energies to enhance the welfare of preschool children. In setting up the *1,2,3 GO! Centre*, we hope to share the experience and knowledge acquired over these years for the benefit of children, families and communities throughout Québec.” The Centre will work in close collaboration with Centraide, which will continue to fund existing and future initiatives within its territory.

Conclusion

The issue of funding for community organizations is capital – no pun intended. In Québec, relations between organizations and the ‘big’ funders have often been tense, so tense that in the late 1980s, popular solidarity funds were developed in three regions of Québec. According to Denis Plamondon from the *Université du Québec à Chicoutimi*, these funds were characterized by “a break with Centraide and a desire to develop an independent funding mechanism.”⁸ In the past decade, the emphasis has been on getting the Québec government to recognize independent community action, accompanied by proper funding. The idea of autonomy is central to the issue of funding, just as it is central to the concept of a caring community. This obviously poses a dilemma for funders. How can the legitimate and vital autonomy of organizations and communities be supported while ensuring that financial resources from donors or taxpayers are used wisely?

For 28 years, Centraide of Greater Montréal has been an important agent of philanthropy that has tried to meet the needs of the least fortunate in the best possible way. Its efforts to achieve its goal have led it to work with community-based initiatives in keeping with strategies focused on empowerment, bringing people, institutions and agencies together around concerted action projects, and promoting citizenship and individual and collective welfare. In doing so, Centraide does not merely support the autonomy of the agencies that it funds; it requires it. This does not mean that it wants to leave the agencies on their own, but rather that each agency it supports should be able to plan, coordinate and assess its activities on its own so as to do a good job of playing its individual and collective role in the social development of its community. The convergence of the agency’s mission and strategic directions with those of Centraide are decisive factors in obtaining financial support. The more autonomous the agency is, the better able it will be to demonstrate this convergence – i.e., to ‘sell’ itself to Centraide – and show its organizational capacity to meet the ensuing challenges.

Although, seen from the outside, the fundraising campaign appears to be its predominant feature, Centraide insists that support for community action is the driving force in all its work. Its publications indicate that it wants to “develop ties between all the components of our society – community agencies, businesses, institutions, people who receive help, donors, etc. – so as to transform Greater Montréal into an environment in which the less fortunate can live in dignity.”⁹ But such ties depend on the presence and participation of social actors – including Centraide – that can act and contribute to achieving this goal. Centraide seems to understand this very well and behaves accordingly, as its work shows. So it is truly the product of its history – an actor for social development that helps to build and sustain caring communities and foster social cohesion throughout its territory.

Endnotes

- ¹ United Way of Canada – Centraide Canada website, visited on March 3, 2003, <http://www.unitedway.ca/english/index.cfm?area=5>
- ² In the special 20th anniversary issue of the *Journal of Centraide*, Vol. 9: 2. April 1995.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Centraide of Greater Montréal. (2000). *Building Caring Communities and Supporting Their Ability to Act*, page 6.
- ⁶ *Journal of Centraide*, Vol. 15: 1, Winter 2002, page 3.
- ⁷ Ibid. The collection of 20 profiles and information sheets for the Montréal neighbourhood round tables – produced jointly by the Public Health Department of the Regional Health and Social Services Board of Montréal-Centre, the City of Montréal and Centraide of Greater Montréal, in the framework of a program of financial support for local social development – available in French on the Public Health Department’s website. <http://www.santepub-mtl.qc.ca/developpement/local/portraits.html>
- ⁸ Plamondon, D. (1990). “Les fonds de solidarité des groupes populaires.” *Nouvelles pratiques sociales*, Vol. 3: 1, pages 87-94.
- ⁹ Centraide of Greater Montréal website, visited on March 5, 2003. <http://www.centraide-mtl.org/centraide/static/whoare/default.htm>