



**Reflecting on Vibrant Communities  
(2002-2006)**

*by*

**Eric Leviten-Reid**

**January 2007**

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## ***Introduction***

Vibrant Communities was launched in the spring of 2002. Formulated around a core set of ideas, these abstract concepts have gradually come to life through the efforts of hundreds of people from diverse backgrounds working together to reduce poverty in their communities. In the words of one participant: “In the past, ‘multisectoral’ was just a word, now it is people in the same room.”

What is Vibrant Communities? How did it come to be? And what difference is it making? The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the Vibrant Communities experience to date: where we’ve been, where we are and where we may go from here.

Part One of this paper reviews the origin of the initiative, its goals and design, and major facets of the work undertaken over the past four years. Part Two offers broad reflections on the experience of Trail Builder communities and the initiative overall. Part Three casts an eye ahead to the next chapter in Vibrant Communities’ development.

The current paper is one of a series of documents discussing Vibrant Communities’ work to date. While it offers reflections at a broad level, other reports examine specific aspects of the work in more detail. An annotated list of resources that may be of interest to the reader is included as Appendix One.

## ***Part One: Origins and Action***

Vibrant Communities is a Pan-Canadian action learning initiative exploring promising local solutions for poverty reduction. It was established through a partnership involving three national sponsors (Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation) and 14 local communities from across the country. Already it has grown to enjoy the participation of several additional communities as well as other funding partners, including the Maytree Foundation, Young Foundation and RBC Financial Group. Human Resources and Social Development Canada also is providing both financial and staff support for the initiative.

### ***Origins: A Need for Change***

The impetus behind Vibrant Communities was a general recognition that efforts to reduce poverty in Canada had stalled – this despite the undeniable prosperity enjoyed by so many in this country.

Between 1961 and 1977 the percentage of Canadians living with low incomes fell from 29 percent to 13 percent. Since then, the poverty rate has not moved below this level, remaining in the 14-19 percent range throughout the 1980s, 1990s and into the current decade. While the rate of poverty has gone up and down with the economy, there has been no underlying decrease in poverty for nearly 30 years.

What is evident in the national statistics has been all the more apparent on the ground in communities. Food banks once considered an emergency response to a passing problem have become a permanent part of the social landscape. Homeless shelters once used almost exclusively by single adults are now frequently needed by families with children as well. Workers who formerly would have been free from poverty by virtue of employment too often now fall within the ranks of the working poor. Not only is poverty entrenched but it also is now touching an array of Canadians that previously would have escaped its grasp.

By the late 1990s, it was clear that broad shifts had occurred in the structure of opportunities and supports available to Canadians: a ‘precarious labour market’ offered too few ‘good jobs’ (paying high wages but requiring high skills) and too many ‘bad’ ones (low wage, part-time employment offering few, if any, benefits); public spending on social programs had been reduced; responsibilities, though not resources, were downloaded from one level of government to another, and from government in general to individuals and communities.

For human service and community agencies of various kinds, the result was an impossible combination: an increase in demand for assistance coupled with fewer resources to do the job. Many found that they were running faster just to stay in place – often times falling behind. Clearly something needed to change.

In various ways in different settings, community groups began searching for new solutions.

### *Seeds of Hope*

One such effort was Opportunities 2000 in Waterloo Region, Ontario. Recognizing that it had reached a plateau in its ability to assist the unemployed, a local community organization set out to expand the scale and impact of its work.

Running from 1996 to 2000, Opportunities 2000 engaged a diverse group of community leaders, nonprofit organizations, government agencies and local businesses around the vision of reducing the region’s poverty rate to the lowest in Canada. Ultimately, it mobilized 86 organizations in support of 47 diverse poverty reduction initiatives ranging from the creation of community enterprises and workforce development initiatives to employer driven changes in workplace practices.

While the initiative did not achieve its target to help 2,000 families exit poverty by the year 2000, it did assist 1,600 households to make significant steps in their journey out of poverty, made

poverty reduction a public priority and created a network of leaders and organizations committed to renewing and sustaining their collaborative work under the new name of Opportunities Waterloo Region.

In late 2001, representatives from three organizations that played major roles in Opportunities 2000 – The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, the Caledon Institute and several principals from Opportunities 2000 who had since formed Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement – came together to reflect on the lessons learned. They concluded that although Opportunities 2000’s results were promising, it was not possible to declare that the approach it had taken would work in other contexts. Further experimentation with other local initiatives was required in order to determine the overall viability of the approach, how it might be pursued in different settings and the extent of the outcomes it was able to achieve.

Fortunately, Waterloo Region was just one of many communities across the country beginning to explore new ways to address poverty. In the spring of 2002, representatives from 13 such communities met with the three national sponsors to explore the possibilities of a Pan-Canadian initiative. Following three days of deliberation, Vibrant Communities was officially launched.

### ***The Vibrant Communities Framework***

The mission of Vibrant Communities reflects the aspiration of communities to develop substantial new strategies for reducing poverty and improving quality of life: “To create and grow a movement of diverse leaders and communities committed to exploring, challenging and testing ways to unleash the potential of communities to substantially reduce poverty and ensure a good quality of life for all citizens.”

At the core of the initiative is a set of promising approaches for addressing poverty. In its evaluation of Opportunities 2000, the Caledon Institute described it as one of a growing number of local initiatives that tackle complex issues through comprehensive, multisectoral efforts [Leviton-Reid 2001]. Such initiatives hold that the causes underlying complex problems, such as poverty, are interlocked and that communities can only hope to make progress on them by collaborating across organizations and sectors.

Vibrant Communities developed this perspective further by specifying five key themes to be explored as an integrated set of approaches for countering poverty:

- Poverty reduction: To reduce poverty rather than simply alleviate its hardships.
- Comprehensive thinking and action: To address the interrelated root causes of poverty rather than its various symptoms.
- Multisectoral collaboration: To engage a broad spectrum of sectors and organizations in a collaborative effort rather than have each work in isolation.

- Community asset building: To emphasize the presence of community assets on which to build rather than deficits to be overcome.
- Community learning and change: To embrace a process of continual community learning and change rather than respond with relatively short term, narrow interventions.

These themes represented an initial set of ‘puzzle pieces’ to be considered in this attempt to breathe new life into Canada’s poverty reduction efforts.

To pursue its work, the initiative established two interrelated components. Communities as well as the policy-makers and funders that support them participate in a Pan-Canadian Learning Community (PCLC) that provides opportunities to share insights and experiences related to community-based poverty reduction and to offer mutual support and guidance. At the same time, a smaller number of ‘Trail Builder’ communities put ideas into practice through multi-faceted, multi-year poverty reduction initiatives undertaken in their local settings. In return for receiving extra financial and technical support from the national initiative, they agree to closely track their lessons and outcomes, and share them with PCLC members and national sponsors.

The overall process is one of ‘action learning.’ Discussions within the Pan-Canadian Learning Community support Trail Builders in developing their initiatives; the practical experiences of Trail Builders fuel the learning in the wider network.

Focusing the initiative’s work was a set of tangible, mid-range objectives:

- To reduce poverty for at least 5,000 households in Canada.
- To expand the number of Canadian communities actively using a set of promising approaches for poverty reduction.
- To link 15 communities in a process of collaborative learning and to support up to five communities to more deliberately learn and apply these approaches to poverty reduction.
- To engage 250 nonprofit organizations and government agencies, 100 low-income leaders and 100 businesses in those communities to join in implementing poverty reduction plans.
- To distill and document lessons learned from these initiatives so that they can be shared in order to help shape policies across sectors and at all levels of government.

### *The Work to Date: An Overview*

A tremendous amount has been undertaken and achieved in the space of four years. The work of Vibrant Communities can be summarized in three major streams: the Pan-Canadian Learning Community, the Trail Builder component and efforts to foster an enabling environment.

## *Pan-Canadian Learning Community*

Between 13 and 16 communities have been active participants in the Pan-Canadian Learning Community at various points over the past four years.

A wide range of activities and resources have been used to support community efforts to learn about comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction including: convenor conference calls, tele-learning sessions, face-to-face forums, coaching, tools, research papers, an e-newsletter and a national website (See Exhibit I).

Among the topics explored through major learning initiatives have been:

- Business Engagement in Poverty Reduction
- Strategies for Sustainable Incomes
- Fundraising for Social Change Initiatives
- Living Wage Campaigns
- Gender and Poverty
- Grantmaking for Comprehensive Impact
- Community Involvement in Policy Change
- Government Support for the Communities Agenda
- Learning and Evaluation

In the end, hundreds of community members from across the country have been engaged in a wide-ranging learning process – sharing local experiences, tapping into outside expertise, accessing reports and papers on numerous topics, meeting by conference call or face-to-face to explore together the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction.

## *Trail Builder Component*

Not surprisingly, many of the communities that became involved in Vibrant Communities were interested in developing multifaceted, multi-year poverty reduction strategies in their local settings. Some participating communities were, in fact, already actively pursuing such initiatives when Vibrant Communities was established. Others moved quickly to do so as well. Still others identified full-fledged local initiatives as their long-term goal and began gradually putting in place the required foundations.

While national sponsors originally targeted five Trail Builders for the initial phase of Vibrant Communities’ operation, in the end six were supported. The expanded number reflects the strong interest of communities to develop local initiatives and the desire of all partners for the additional learning a sixth Trail Builder could provide.

## **Exhibit I – Supporting Pan-Canadian Learning**

Convenor Conference Calls – PCLC members have participated in bi-monthly conference calls. The purpose of the calls is to update participants on local developments, share lessons and insights based on local experiences, and collectively shape the Pan-Canadian initiative.

Tele-learning Events – Approximately ten tele-learning series have been conducted on topics such as engaging business in poverty reduction, community involvement in policy development, fundraising for social change and conducting living wage campaigns. These sessions enable participants to engage in peer learning or access the expertise of guest resource persons.

Face-to-Face Forums – Approximately every two years, Vibrant Communities has held a major face-to-face event in which local and national partners are able to engage in a more extended sharing of their experiences and insights. These events feature a series of learning sessions and workshops. The face-to-face sessions help build relationships that enable peer learning at a distance. They also help orient and inspire newcomers to the Vibrant Communities effort.

Coaching – Tamarack provides coaching support on a limited basis to PCLC members and on a more extensive basis to Trail Builder communities. Coaching for PCLC members largely addresses ways participants can foster community learning. It also pertains to ways communities can begin building full-fledged local poverty reduction initiatives.

Tools – Tamarack has developed eight tools to help communities address a variety of practical challenges related to planning and implementing comprehensive, multisectoral poverty reduction strategies. Among the topics addressed are: the role of local convenors, understanding poverty in one's local context and selecting strategies for poverty reduction.

Research Papers – In an effort to clarify the thinking behind this work and raise awareness about the overall approach, the Caledon Institute has written a series of research papers exploring the ideas and practices associated with comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction. More than a dozen papers have been completed to date on topics such as core concepts related to comprehensive community initiatives, the roles played by various partners in these efforts and ways that governments can support community-based strategies for poverty reduction.

Engage! – This bi-weekly electronic newsletter provides updates on major developments within Vibrant Communities. It also highlights resources, such as research papers and tools, which may be of interest to participants. Engage! is written both for Vibrant Communities participants and others interested in this work. It currently has more than 6,000 subscribers.

National Website ([www.vibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca)) – A national website plays an integral role in supporting the initiative's learning process. It features Web pages for participating local communities, resources pertaining to the various learning themes being explored and research papers, tools and reports emerging from Vibrant Communities. In the first six months of 2006, more than 22,800 users engaged in over 40,600 sessions on the website and downloaded more than 16,500 files.

PCLC Evaluation – To date, two evaluations have been undertaken of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community. Conducted by C.A.C. International, a Montreal-based firm specializing in evaluation research, the purpose of the evaluations is to support continuous improvement in the design and implementation of the PCLC.

Supports – Matching funds of up to \$100,000 per year for a maximum of three years, ongoing coaching from Tamarack staff and up to \$3,000 per community for accessing additional Tamarack, local or peer coaches; assistance in developing the local capacity to track poverty reduction outcomes and lessons learned through the local initiative.

Significant time, energy and resources are required for developing comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives for poverty reduction. In Vibrant Communities, the development process has entailed three distinct phases. In each phase, communities seek to realize certain outcomes and receive specified supports from the national initiative as they do (see Exhibit II).

One of the primary purposes of Vibrant Communities is to understand the different ways in which comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives may unfold. As discussed more fully below, despite underlying similarities, each of the Trail Builder initiatives is distinct in its overall approach to poverty reduction and the specific interventions it is pursuing. A substantial Trail Builder learning and evaluation process has been developed to follow the work of each initiative as it evolves, track the outcomes achieved and identify the lessons learned.

This learning and evaluation process consists of three main streams. In the first stream, each Trail Builder develops a ‘theory of change’ articulating the key ideas guiding the initiative in its work: its understanding of poverty and poverty reduction, the goals it is seeking with respect to community capacity building, household outcomes and systemic changes, the specific strategies to be pursued and the role that the collaboration will play in the poverty reduction process. This ‘theory of change’ constitutes a conceptual baseline that allows local and national partners to refine the thinking behind these initiatives.

Working with the Caledon Institute, each Trail Builder has prepared a ‘theory of change’ story. On an annual basis, Tamarack, Caledon and the Trail Builder conduct a local reflection session to consider the progress the initiative has made in achieving its goals and to determine the extent to which its theory of change is being borne out in practice. On the basis of this reflection session, lessons are identified, the theory of change revised and adjustments made in the initiative’s plans for the period ahead.

The second stream of work in the learning and evaluation process focuses on capturing the results from the poverty reduction strategies undertaken by Trail Builders. Working with national sponsors, Trail Builders have developed two-page descriptions of the specific strategies they are pursuing. These descriptions briefly indicate the challenge being addressed, the strategy being employed and the results anticipated or achieved. To date, 21 such stories have been documented. These narrative descriptions are also intended to help Trail Builders develop evaluation plans for tracking the results achieved by each initiative, including logic models and research strategies.

Finally, the third stream of the Trail Builder learning and evaluation effort involves the production of regular reports that summarize the work being done and the results achieved, and allow for dissemination of findings among Vibrant Communities participants and other interested groups. Trail Builders prepare brief mid-year updates and more extensive end-of-year reports identifying key developments in their initiatives, challenges encountered and lessons learned. Included are statistical reports concerning the two main quantitative targets being tracked by the initiative: the number of partners engaged in the local initiative and the number of low-income households benefiting from the work and in what ways.

## **Exhibit II – Phases in the Trail Builder Stream**

### **Phase I – Exploring Local Interest**

Purpose: To ensure that prospective local initiatives are strongly rooted in their communities.

Activities: One-on-one conversations, focus groups and community meetings to consider the local poverty challenge and possible participation in the learning community or Trail Builder component of Vibrant Communities.

Supports: A grant for \$5,000 to underwrite the costs of this community consultation.

### **Phase II – Building Conditions of Success**

Purpose: To put in place three key building blocks for comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives: an initial three-year action plan, a multisectoral leadership group, and adequate financial and human resources to undertake the work.

Activities: Consultations with interested individuals and organizations, additional research about the causes and possible responses to poverty, strategic planning sessions, development of governance structures and staff teams, and fundraising.

Supports: A grant for \$20,000 to underwrite the costs of the development phase; coaching support from Tamarack with respect to the design and development of the initiative and from Caledon with respect to learning and evaluation.

### **Phase III – Action/Learning/Change**

Purpose: To implement and continuously evolve the community action plan for poverty reduction.

Activities: Implementation of initial poverty reduction strategies, tracking of results anticipated, ongoing reflection and learning, and periodic revision of the poverty reduction plan.

Supports: Matching funds of up to \$100,000 per year for a maximum of three years; ongoing coaching from Tamarack staff and up to \$3,000 per community for accessing additional Tamarack, local or peer coaches; assistance in developing the local capacity to track poverty reduction outcomes and lessons learned through the local initiative.

Building on this information, national sponsors have prepared a number of overview documents that support learning among participants and allow for sharing these lessons. The Caledon Institute prepares periodic reflection papers looking across all of the Trail Builder experiences and other dimensions of the Vibrant Communities initiative. It also is preparing a series of longer stories on selected poverty reduction practices employed by Trail Builders. Nine such stories have been completed to date.

In addition, Tamarack and Caledon have collaborated on the production of two major reports examining the Trail Builder work to date. *Understanding the Potential and Practice of Multi-sectoral, Comprehensive Efforts to Reduce Poverty* considers the broad patterns evident in the design and operation of Trail Builder initiatives. *In From the Field* explores the first set of poverty reduction strategies undertaken by Trail Builders (see Appendix A for a list of publications).

### ***Building an Enabling Environment***

The third broad element of Vibrant Communities' work pertains to building an enabling environment for comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction. Both local communities and national sponsors are directly involved in efforts to change the wider institutional context in ways that better support 'joined up' strategies for countering poverty. In particular, attention has been focused on two areas: the role of government and public policy, and the relationship between community initiatives and funders of all kinds.

Vibrant Communities partners have created two unique mechanisms to engage policy-makers and funders. The Policy Dialogue and the Funders Network have focused on exploring the concepts and mechanics of comprehensive local initiatives to reduce poverty and their implications for policy-makers and funders.

The Policy Dialogue was coordinated by the Caledon Institute. Representatives from 11 federal government departments, three provincial governments and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities participated in an 18-month series of tele-learning sessions, culminating in a face-to-face meeting with communities at the second Vibrant Communities national gathering. The Policy Dialogue served to orient policy-makers to the key ideas associated with comprehensive community initiatives as well as the opportunities and challenges related to government/community collaboration.

As a follow-up to the Policy Dialogue, Tamarack, Caledon, and Human Resources and Social Development Canada have initiated a Government Learning Circle to explore more deeply how all three orders of government can work together in support of comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction. The Government Learning Circle is being chaired by Susan Scotti, Assistant Deputy Minister, Social Development Sectors Branch, Human Resources and Social Development Canada, a long-time champion of community involvement in social and economic issues.

The Government Learning Circle focuses to date on government officials who have had a direct involvement with Vibrant Communities groups across the country or are interested in becoming more directly involved. Approximately 80 government officials participated in each of the first three tele-learning sessions held in the spring of 2006. The overall theme of the Government Learning Circle is reflected in the topic addressed during these calls: how government can provide leadership in support of communities. Future sessions are expected to explore more closely the practical contributions that governments can make to community-based strategies for poverty reduction.

The second major initiative for building an enabling environment focuses on the role of funders. The Funders Network is composed of dozens of public, philanthropic and corporate funders active in Vibrant Communities at the local and national levels. The Network, chaired by Tim Brodhead, President of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, explores the rationale and procedures of comprehensive and social justice grant-making. Its purpose is to provide a forum where funders can consider the challenges associated with supporting comprehensive community initiatives and effective practices for addressing them.

The first tele-learning event sponsored by the Funders Network featured a series of conversations with Jay Connor, author of *Community Visions, Community Solutions: Grantmaking for Comprehensive Impact*. The purpose of the calls was to learn about funding practices that could help expand the impact of poverty reduction efforts in communities across Canada. These sessions examined three key themes: why comprehensive solutions are needed, how communities can achieve greater impact by developing comprehensive, collaborative initiatives, and the critical role that funders can play in enabling this type of community effort.

Building on this first series, the Funders Network next sponsored a tele-learning event focused on the practice of Social Justice Grantmaking in Canada. This two-part series considered how a commitment to do grant-making work from a social justice perspective can enable funders to address the root causes of poverty and find long-term solutions to pervasive community problems. It featured discussions with Betsy Martin, Community Foundations of Canada and Carolyn Milne, Hamilton Community Foundation.

Approximately 50 individuals have joined each of the Funders Network calls to hear the guest presenters and share their experiences. Future sessions are expected to explore more deeply the purpose, types and levels of funding required for comprehensive community change efforts and how public and philanthropic funding systems might be better aligned to support such efforts.

## ***Early Conclusions: It's Working!***

Not only has there been a great deal of work undertaken through Vibrant Communities to date but the early findings from this work are encouraging.

Most importantly, it is clear that comprehensive, multisectoral strategies are viable in diverse community settings and under the leadership of different local partnerships. Communities across the country are effectively applying the initiative's core ideas to achieve substantial results in their various settings.

Second, communities are interested in supporting and learning from each other. Notwithstanding questions about how best to undertake Pan-Canadian learning to maximize its benefit, communities have consistently expressed an appreciation for the opportunities to learn from and with one another. Often isolated in their work, the PCLC is providing communities with regular access to others grappling with the same basic challenges, both Vibrant Communities partners and external resource persons who have addressed similar issues in other contexts.

Finally, the overall design of Vibrant Communities is providing a powerful new approach for enabling learning and change on a Pan-Canadian basis. Part of what distinguishes Vibrant Communities from other initiatives is the set of key building blocks that comprise its structure. This architecture enables the project to engage simultaneously in place-based action to reduce poverty, ongoing learning and substantive policy change. The unique structure gives it both local and national presence – a practical and powerful combination.

These conclusions are substantiated in basic terms by the initiative's success to date in meeting its specific objectives (see Exhibit III). Such results, however, are only the beginning of the story. More important still are the lessons that have been learned about the overall approach Vibrant Communities has been pursuing: how comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives can contribute to poverty reduction, the value of collaborative learning on a Pan-Canadian basis and the potential for strengthening this work through enhanced support from enabling institutions such as government and funders.

As important as 'what' Vibrant Communities has done to date is the 'how' of its work: how do you foster new ways of thinking and acting in order to improve outcomes on intractable problems such as poverty? The following discussion offers some observations about the way in which Vibrant Communities has tackled this underlying challenge in its general approach, through the work of local initiatives and through its overall architecture.

**Exhibit III – Early Results from Vibrant Communities**

<b>Goal</b>	<b>Results (June 2006)</b>
Reduce poverty for 5,000 households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approximately 16,200 low-income households have experienced substantial benefits through initiatives to which local collaborations made a significant contribution.</li> <li>• Benefits have been experienced in six pathways:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Improved income support: 10,220</li> <li>– More affordable goods and services: 8,118</li> <li>– Better education and early childhood development opportunities: 525</li> <li>– New and improved housing and increased assets: 347</li> <li>– New jobs: 135</li> <li>– Changed employer practices: 108 (Note: Some households have benefited from initiatives in more than one pathway).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Link 15 communities in collaborative learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Between 13 and 16 communities have been active participants in the Pan-Canadian Learning Community.</li> <li>• A survey conducted by an outside evaluator determined that 92 percent of respondents found Pan-Canadian learning made practical contributions to their local work [C.A.C. International 2003].</li> </ul>
Support up to five Trail Builder initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Six communities have elected to pursue the Trail Builder route and have established multi-year poverty reduction initiatives in their local settings.</li> <li>• Additional communities from within the PCLC and beyond are poised to establish such initiatives as well.</li> </ul>
Engage 250 nonprofit organizations and government agencies, 100 low-income leaders and 100 businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trail Builders have engaged 637 partners in their initiatives:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Government: 149</li> <li>– Business: 120</li> <li>– Nonprofit Organizations: 189</li> <li>– Low-income Leaders: 82</li> <li>– Citizens-at-Large: 97</li> </ul> </li> <li>• These figures surpass the targets set in all areas except involvement of low-income leaders.</li> </ul>
Distill and document lessons to share with others and shape policies across all sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extensive efforts have been made to document and share lessons, and influence policy change in key areas:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Development of the Policy Dialogue, Government Learning Circle and Funders Network</li> <li>– 80 speaking engagements</li> <li>– 18 tools and research papers</li> <li>– 15 community stories and 21 project vignettes</li> <li>– 36 editions of the bi-weekly e-newsletter (<i>Engage!</i>) to more than 6,000 subscribers</li> <li>– an extensive interactive website that receives on average more than 6,000 visits each month.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## ***Fostering Change***

At its core, Vibrant Communities is a process of learning and change. A critical dimension of its work has been engaging diverse participants in the search for new solutions to the problem of poverty.

As one highly regarded change theorist has put it, change is a process of “unfreezing” [Schein] – a willingness on the part of those involved to suspend their commitment to the way things are and open themselves to new possibilities. In his view, three critical factors are involved in fostering change. First, change emerges from a sense of dissatisfaction or frustration caused by information that disconfirms our hopes or expectations. Second, there is the need for that information to be embraced as an opportunity, rather than rejected as a threat. Finally, there is a need for an environment where it is safe for people to question their current ways of thinking and acting and consider new ones.

In many respects, this process aptly describes what Vibrant Communities’ national and local partners have done. On the one hand, the initiative has highlighted that the effort to counter poverty in Canada has stalled and argued that the persistence of poverty in a country of such wealth is unacceptable. On the other, it has refocused attention on a compelling goal that addresses the aspiration of many Canadians (not just alleviating the hardships of living in poverty but reducing the incidence of poverty itself) and offered hope for a way forward (comprehensive, multisectoral strategies for poverty reduction).

Finally, both on the Pan-Canadian level and in local communities, the initiative has created a safe space for people to explore new possibilities. Many of the principles and beliefs guiding Vibrant Communities specifically focus on creating a context that encourages the search for new ways of doing things: “We understand that everyone is part of the solution and part of the problem.” “We ensure a supportive, nonjudgmental environment where members can share their knowledge, experience and stories.” “We do not have answers, only a commitment to learn, change and grow.” In fact, one of the primary skills of convenors, both nationally and locally, is to engage diverse partners and enable dialogue across the various perspectives they bring to the table.

## ***Reframing the Issue***

Engaging people in a process of change also means ‘reframing’ the identified issue in a way that helps explain an existing impasse and offers a plausible way forward [Schein]. Framing is a metaphor that refers to the way a picture is organized to highlight some elements (the foreground) rather than others (the background). The way an issue is framed can conceal or reveal possible ways for addressing it. Reframing an issue puts the situation in new light that can open up an entirely new realm of creative responses [New Internationalist (a)].

In this respect, Vibrant Communities has been not so much about advancing a specific set of solutions as about recasting the problem in a way that helps to generate a new set of responses. From the outset, Vibrant Communities has been premised on the idea that poverty is a complex issue that cannot be effectively addressed by any one organization or sector acting on its own. Rather, multiple interrelated root causes, such as training and education, housing and employment, need to be addressed in a strategic and coordinated way. As a result, multisector collaborations that bring together individuals and organizations from various spheres of activity are needed to develop and guide community plans for poverty reduction. Such efforts build on existing assets and foster ongoing learning and change to further develop the community's capacity to reduce poverty.

While this basic perspective remains intact, it has been refined in important ways as the initiative unfolded. In particular, our understanding of complex issues and what is needed to address them has deepened. This enhanced appreciation has implications for how we understand the work under way in partner communities and for the issues to be addressed as Vibrant Communities continues to evolve.

### *The Nature of Complex Problems*

Most of all, what we have come to appreciate is that complex problems are not just more complicated than other problems. They are different in kind.

Simple problems and complicated ones are distinguished from each other primarily by the number of factors they involve. Simple problems, such as changing a flat tire, involve relatively few elements and can be tackled consistently by following a standard set of instructions. Complicated problems, on the other hand, such as building a car, involve numerous elements, require extensive expertise and necessitate a high degree of coordination. However, at their core, complicated problems can be tackled much in the way that simple problems can, by breaking the challenge down into its component parts and solving each one independently [Glouberman 2003: 3; New Internationalist (b)].

Complex problems, however, are distinguished not by the number of elements they involve but by the dynamic relationship among those elements. In such problems, a wide range of intersecting factors – shaped in part by their internal dynamics and in part by one another – interact to generate a constantly shifting set of issues and challenges [New Internationalist (b)]. An example would be environmental problems. In this case, to continue with automobiles, the rise of the car is one of many elements – industrial forms of production, consumerism and population growth among many others – that interact to generate environmental concerns in their diverse and changing forms. What results is a problem that is driven ultimately not by any one cause but by the ongoing relationships among a variety of forces.

In this respect, complex problems are fundamentally social in nature. They are about the relationships among a diverse set of stakeholders who are inextricably involved in one another's affairs.

Accordingly, the solution to complex problems is also fundamentally social. Problems such as poverty can be addressed effectively only when partners from different sectors, spheres and levels of activity work together on an ongoing basis to adjust and re-adjust how they impact one another through the decisions and actions they take. Specifically, this means participating in a "constant cycle of thinking, acting and learning together" where partners come to "understand each other's perspectives; do what they can to make things better and then evaluate how successful they have been before starting the process all over again" [New Internationalist (a)].

In essence, the goal is to develop enhanced capacity for the collaborative governance of the numerous factors shaping the identified problem – in this case, poverty. It is this alternative way of conceiving and addressing the problem that is the key to achieving improved results.

### ***Beyond Fractured, Piecemeal Responses***

This understanding of complex issues and the collaborative governance that is needed to address them represents a substantial shift from the relatively piecemeal, fragmented approach that has tended to be employed in the past.

Previous efforts to address poverty and other complex issues have too often targeted specific aspects of the problem rather than the interplay among their multiple root causes. To some extent, this approach has been justified in that it has enabled a level of technical expertise to develop with respect to specific aspects of the overall problem, such as housing, training and education, and employment. However, the downside of that more specialized approach, and the 'siloed' public policy and funding streams associated with it, is that the linkages across these spheres of activity are not well addressed. In part, this means people falling through cracks in the wider system, or encountering gaps or barriers that prevent them from advancing consistently along a pathway out of poverty. It also means that opportunities that could be realized through cross-sectoral collaboration tend to be lost. Most fundamentally, it means a failure to develop the norms, skills, structures and processes for collaborative governance that would prevent these various problems from arising in the first place.

As Jay Connor commented in *Community Visions, Community Solutions*: "Fundors and communities are weighed down by past ways of working – such as fragmented problems, fragmented resources, uncoordinated public policies, and turf protection – that are no longer very helpful" [Connor and Kadel-Taras 2003: 17]. What is needed instead is to "work at a systems level, crossing artificial boundaries of sectors and programs so community problems can be addressed in a comprehensive way" [Connor and Kadel-Taras 2003: 20].

It is this broad shift from a model of piecemeal, fragmented strategies to one of collaborative governance that Vibrant Communities has been pursuing.

## ***Part Two: Trail Builders – Bringing Ideas to Life***

Particularly exciting in the work of Vibrant Communities to date has been the effort of Trail Builders to bring these ideas to life in their various local settings. These initiatives are shedding light on what is required to effectively engage partners in the search for new ways of working together to counter poverty. In addition, they are charting the different forms that comprehensive, multi-sectoral approaches can take in communities and demonstrating in tangible terms the contributions such efforts can make.

The current set of Trail Builders are the Quality of Life CHALLENGE in BC's Capital Region, Vibrant Communities Edmonton, Vibrant Communities Calgary, Opportunities Niagara (Niagara Region, Ontario), *Vivre Saint-Michel en santé* (Montréal) and Vibrant Communities Saint John.

### ***Engaging Partners***

Looking across the experience of the six Trail Builders, it is possible to identify a set of key factors that help bring diverse local partners together in the search for new responses to the challenge of poverty: awareness, hope, a sound plan, opportunities to contribute (locally and beyond), opportunities to learn, and a commitment to tracking progress. Underlying all of these factors and bringing them to life is the process of relationship building that is critical to all initiatives.

As discussed earlier, *awareness* of an issue is often the trigger that initiates a process of learning. For some participants in local initiatives, this awareness has meant a new recognition of the extent of poverty in their community. In many communities, poverty is an invisible or understated problem. Information documenting the level of poverty, often in the midst of plenty, can provide the impetus for local residents to become involved in the search for new solutions. This was the case, for instance, in BC's Capital Region where studies conducted by the Community Council and its partners highlighted the extent of poverty and other issues related to quality of life in the region. These studies provided a foundation of information that supported the development of the Quality of Life CHALLENGE.

Awareness, however, may also involve a new appreciation of the experience of poverty. Some Trail Builders have made particular efforts to put a human face on poverty, both to personalize it and to dispel myths about who experiences poverty and why. This closer understanding of the reality of poverty in human terms also has been important for bringing people to action. As will be discussed,

the Quality of Life CHALLENGE also made effective use of this type of research. The Community Council's publication, *Making Room: The Human Face of Housing Affordability in BC's Capital Region*, not only documented the scale of the affordable housing problem in the region but also brought the issue to life through the numerous profiles it offered of individuals affected by this problem.

Finally, raising awareness may also involve presenting the challenge of poverty or some particular aspect of it in a light that opens the door to new possible solutions. As discussed earlier, the overall approach being explored by Vibrant Communities shifts awareness in this way and is in itself a basis for engaging participants. The same holds true for more specific issues that Trail Builders are pursuing – e.g., the question of what constitutes a 'living wage.' A further illustration is the report prepared by Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) in conjunction with local partners the Human Development Council and the University of New Brunswick. Among other things, *Poverty and Plenty: A Statistical Snapshot of the Quality of Life in Greater Saint John*, revealed the extent to which poverty in Saint John is concentrated in a series of high-poverty neighbourhoods. This finding enabled VCSJ to re-think its strategy for poverty reduction, now anchoring it in multifaceted strategies for neighbourhood revitalization.

Even more compelling for many people than awareness of a problem is the *hope* that something significant can be done in response to it. For some, the will to fight poverty may have waned out of a sense that it was an insurmountable problem – 'nothing can be done' – or that the most that could be achieved is to lessen the hardships facing those who experience poverty. As with Vibrant Communities as a whole, a renewed focus on *reducing poverty* is the type of clear and compelling goal that has been able to galvanize interest in local communities. It speaks to the desire of people to make a difference, especially one that addresses their deeper aspirations.

But hope, of course, is empty without a credible *plan*. At least one Trail Builder, discovered that it was particularly difficult to engage partners, particularly those who were not already attuned to the issue of poverty, in the absence of a relatively developed action plan. In part, this reflected the challenge of articulating the relatively abstract concepts behind the Vibrant Communities approach. For Vibrant Communities Edmonton, the solution involved a core group of participants outlining the basic elements of a plan in order to substantiate the nature of the proposed initiative. The plan helped to make the broad ideas more tangible and to instill confidence that hope was justified. On this basis, new partners could more easily see the potential of the venture and were more willing to participate both in carrying out the plan and elaborating it more fully.

Specifying a plan at some level of detail also makes it possible for prospective partners to recognize more readily the particular ways they might contribute to the work. It often is true that people are quite willing to contribute but need help to identify what they can do. Furthermore, as in Edmonton, some local partners are attracted to *opportunities to participate* in conceptualizing and planning the initiative, while others are more action-oriented and look for specific projects in which they can play particular roles. At some point in their development, all Trail Builders engage new partners around the specific poverty reduction strategies they undertake. For some, continuously identifying concrete actions that community members might take to help reduce poverty is part of their

core strategy. For example, in its communication material, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE consistently describes the nature of the issue at hand, including both numbers and stories to convey its scale and its meaning in human terms, and identifies concrete measures that individuals or organizations can take to address the problem.

For some local participants, a strong motivating factor is the Pan-Canadian nature of the initiative. In part, the existence of the wider national effort adds credibility to the issue being addressed and the approaches being explored. At the same time, some participants are attracted by the opportunity to use their local efforts to help solve a national problem. The Pan-Canadian design of Vibrant Communities enhances the prospect that effective local strategies will be applied in other communities across the country. It also strengthens the prospect of affecting public policy or tackling other systemic issues relevant to poverty reduction. The opportunity to join with others across Canada to address factors that underlie poverty in all communities is an important ‘value added’ that encourages participation from various local partners. Some individuals have explicitly identified this dimension of the initiative as the key factor attracting their involvement.

Likewise, the focus on *learning* both in local initiatives and through the Pan-Canadian Learning Community can help to engage participants. In part, the emphasis on learning makes the challenge of poverty reduction less intimidating. There is no need to enter with answers to what often is seen as an overwhelming problem. The learning focus also provides the psychological safety required for exploring new possibilities, including possible changes in one’s own ideas and actions. Finally, the opportunity for learning is itself a source of hope. It raises the prospect that there are new ways of doing things that either can be devised locally or gleaned from the efforts of others across the country, or elsewhere in the world.

Finally, Trail Builders have consistently identified the desire of participants (as well as funders of all kinds) to be working toward clear targets and be committed to *tracking and reporting on their progress* in achieving them. The underlying reason for people to become involved is to make a difference on an issue that they believe is important. Tracking progress allows them to know whether their efforts are paying off and, if not, to make the adjustments needed to achieve their goals. Vibrant Communities’ commitment to specific targets and extensive tracking and documentation builds confidence that the initiative is serious about achieving significant outcomes.

Cutting across all of these factors that contribute to the engagement of local partners is a somewhat more intangible element that is vital to the work of all Trail Builders. This is the *relationship building* that animates people’s interest in the initiative and sustains their involvement. As one Trail Builder identified, ideas and information no matter how meaningful in themselves are rarely enough to move people from awareness to action. A major role for local convenors and other leaders in these initiatives is to provide the human touch that connects people to the issue, to other partners and to actions that they can take together.

## *Common Principles; Local Variations*

Although Trail Builder initiatives are exploring a variety of common principles and approaches, each shapes these elements in ways that are tailored to its local context, including the perspectives and priorities of its partners and the wider community. Such customizing is vital to engaging the support of local participants. The way each Trail Builder frames its work must resonate with people in their respective local settings. In the end, while they bear a family resemblance to one another, each Trail Builder has its own distinct personality. Collectively, they reveal the variety of forms these comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives may take.

While all Trail Builders operate in urban environments, their local contexts vary in many respects. While many differences are simply given by the local environment others reflect the choices that local participants make about the parameters of their initiatives – e.g., the scale of the settings in which they operate (see Exhibit IV).

Not surprisingly, the initiatives designed by Trail Builders reflect the many variations in their local situations:

- Various initiatives operate at different geographic scales (Saint-Michel in its immediate neighbourhood; Saint John on a series of high poverty neighbourhoods throughout the city, Calgary and Edmonton on a city-wide basis; Niagara and BC's Capital Region on a more regional basis)
- Some have established tighter time frames for their work than others (Edmonton's relatively tight focus on its three-year plan versus the 10-year poverty reduction targets set by Saint John or the 20- to 30-year perspective informing the work of the CHALLENGE in BC's Capital Region)
- Some have chosen to concentrate on the circumstances of a particular low-income group (Saint John's emphasis on single parents; Edmonton's focus on people working and earning low incomes), with others addressing the needs of low-income residents in more general terms
- each having selected specific areas of intervention depending on the challenges and opportunities with which they are presented (many tackling workforce development and housing issues – albeit in different ways; others targeting employer practices, affordable goods and services, income security policies, or education and early childhood development).

*Exhibit IV – Variables Shaping Local Initiatives*

- Scale of community (neighbourhood, city-wide or regional)
- State of the local economy (booming or struggling)
- Public policy environment (friendly or adverse)
- Local experience with collaborations (extensive or limited)
- Public perceptions of poverty and poverty reduction
- Level of engagement of various sectors with the issue of poverty efforts
- Different groups of low-income residents seeking to exit poverty
- Specific array of community assets on which to build
- Perspectives and priorities of local partners

## *Exhibit V – Trail Builder Theories of Change (Abbreviated Versions)*

### ➤ **BC’s Capital Region – Building an Inclusive, Collaborative Leadership Culture**



Since 1999, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE has charted a bold new way for people throughout BC’s Capital Region to improve the quality of life for all, particularly those disadvantaged by poverty. By carefully nurturing a network of relationships, the CHALLENGE is helping to build a climate in which the community has the continued capacity to self-organize around issues that threaten its quality of life. Currently focused on three areas of activity – Sustainable Incomes, Affordable Housing and Community Connections – the CHALLENGE raises community awareness and invites residents to take action on these issues of concern. In the process it promotes principles and practices that build a culture of engagement, collaboration and inclusion.

### ➤ **Calgary – Attacking the Systemic Roots of Poverty**



By educating Calgarians about the complex realities of poverty and influencing the development of responsive public policies, Vibrant Communities Calgary is trying to create a profound shift in thinking. It seeks to move from a climate that sees poverty as a personal problem to one in which systemic change makes it possible for individuals and households to improve their circumstances. With major initiatives on income support programs for persons with disabilities, discount transit passes for low-income residents and a living wage policy, Vibrant Communities Calgary already has surpassed its target of assisting 1,000 households in their efforts to exit poverty.

### ➤ **Edmonton – Building Family Economic Success**



The goal of Vibrant Communities Edmonton is to help 1,000 households build family economic success. Focusing its efforts on residents who work but earn low incomes, Vibrant Communities Edmonton seeks to build on local assets and help people move from a position of need to one of self-sufficiency (from “surviving to thriving”). It has developed a well-defined strategy and action plan that focuses on three areas of activity: Workforce Development, Family Economic Support and Community Investment.

➤ **Niagara – Untying the Knots; Connecting the Dots**



Opportunities Niagara's goal is to help 2,000 households move out of poverty and improve their quality of life by 2007. In this wide-ranging region with numerous public, private and community organizations, the key task for Opportunities Niagara is to build the partnerships that result in new policies, programs and services for countering poverty. Its focus is untying the knots and connecting the dots so that the potential of community action is realized. Opportunities Niagara offers an array of services to the community: social marketing, brokering and coordination, technical assistance and coaching, and accessing resources. Key areas of activity include: adequate employment, affordable housing and accessible transportation.

➤ **Saint John – Dismantling the Poverty Traps**



The long-term goal of Vibrant Communities Saint John is to bring the city's poverty rate in line with the national average over a ten-year period. Its interim objective is to assist 800 households in their journeys out of poverty by 2008. The Saint John area has the highest incidence of lone-parent poverty in Canada and many of its low-income residents live in high poverty neighbourhoods. By rooting its strategy in the challenges of low-income neighbourhoods, Vibrant Communities Saint John will tackle the interlocking issues that keep lone-parent families and other low-income residents in poverty. Its poverty reduction strategy currently includes four key components: Advocacy and Mentoring, Investing in Children and Youth, Education to Employment, and Safe and Affordable Housing.

➤ **Saint-Michel – Animating Neighbourhood Renewal**



In 1991, *Vivre Saint-Michel en santé* was formed to support local residents in their efforts to build a healthy community. While gains have been made in a number of areas, including enhancing access to services, Saint-Michel has remained one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Montreal. In 2003, *Vivre Saint-Michel en santé* established *Le Chantier de revitalization urbaine et sociale* (a task force for urban and social revitalization) specifically to focus on the problem of poverty and social exclusion. Key to its strategy is expanding the range of partners from within the neighbourhood, such as newcomers and business, and strengthening links with important structures outside the neighbourhood itself. An ambitious action plan focused on employment, housing and services is renewing optimism in Saint-Michel and building momentum for change.

## *Adding Value: The Work in Action*

A challenge in the early stages of Vibrant Communities both nationally and locally was to indicate in tangible ways the value added offered by a comprehensive, multisectoral approach to poverty reduction. Such similarities and differences are reflected in the ‘theories of change’ developed by each Trail Builder (see Exhibit V for abbreviated versions of the Trail Builder theories of change).

The vital implication for this approach to poverty reduction is the need for local initiatives to have the leeway to shape their efforts in ways appropriate to local circumstances and perceptions. As will be discussed, this has been a principle guiding the operation of Vibrant Communities nationally. It also is a crucial consideration for policy-makers and funders who wish to support such efforts.

With Trail Builder initiatives well into their implementation phases, it is now possible to point to at least six areas in which these initiatives are making distinctive contributions:

- i. perceptions of poverty
  - raising the profile of poverty
  - shifting the focus from alleviation to reduction
  - enhancing understanding of the problem and possible solutions
  - building confidence that effective measures can be taken
- ii. partnerships
  - creating the local machinery (convenor organizations and multisectoral governance bodies) for supporting broad-based poverty reduction initiatives
  - engaging individuals, organizations and sectors that have not previously taken an active or extensive part
  - helping individuals and organizations identify roles they can play
  - improving the capacity of diverse participants to work together
- iii. use of resources
  - coordinating resources by developing a shared vision and plan of action
  - mobilizing additional resources (financial and technical)
- iv. learning
  - releasing creative energy as participants explore new ways of thinking and acting
  - expanding the range of ideas and strategies available to communities
- v. poverty reduction strategies
  - improving effectiveness of various strategies, programs and services by enhancing their connections with one another
  - improving the quality of economic opportunities available to people living in poverty

- vi. public policy
  - building a constituency that supports improved public policies
  - improving collaboration between government and communities
  - enabling community involvement in the design and application of public policy.

These distinctive contributions are reflected in a growing variety of specific poverty reduction strategies. Each illustrates in its own way how comprehensive, multisectoral approaches can play a key role in advancing poverty reduction efforts. Several examples can indicate how these comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives are enabling tangible results to be achieved.

#### *Niagara's Job Bus: Untying Knots to Realize Potential*

The Job Bus initiative in Niagara Region indicates the value of the brokering role that collaborations can play in order to 'untie the knots' contributing to poverty. In this case, Opportunities Niagara worked with business, nonprofit and government partners to overcome a transportation problem that was driving hotel operators to hire 'offshore workers' rather than local residents.

A sprawling region made up of multiple municipal governments, Niagara Region has a highly fragmented public transit system. The lack of coordination between the parts of the municipal system makes it unreasonably expensive and time consuming for residents from some parts of the region to travel to work in other areas. Opportunities Niagara successfully proposed a set of arrangements in which a major hotel operator would partner with an employment service agency and a municipal transit authority to run a 'job bus' that would make transportation to Niagara Falls viable for participants in a job readiness program. The pilot project resulted in 24 residents securing good paying jobs, the hotel securing a reliable source of local employees and Niagara Region saving hundreds of thousands of dollars in social assistance payments. The initiative has now expanded to involve three additional partners and four more bus routes. Stage two is expected to benefit 100 prospective workers. Moreover, the success of the initiative is giving a boost to Opportunities Niagara's broader goal to achieve policy changes that improve regional transit in Niagara.

#### *Regional Housing Trust Fund: Building Support for Systemic Change*

In BC's Capital Region, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE has demonstrated an ability to use its broad network of community partners and its core capacity for research and communication to help bring about government support for a major affordable housing initiative, the creation of a Regional Housing Trust Fund.

The CHALLENGE and its convening organization, the Community Council, were both active members of a multisectoral housing group, the Housing Affordability Partnership (HAP). HAP had been working for years to achieve government support for a variety of affordable housing initiatives,

including the trust fund. At a point when municipal governments were due to decide on whether they would make financial contributions to the fund, the CHALLENGE helped raise the public profile of the issue and create the support needed to encourage six of 13 municipalities to support the fund. It did this in part by using Housing Affordability Week, an annual event established to raise awareness about housing issues, to focus attention on the need for the fund. Moreover, it timed the release of a major report prepared by the Community Council, *Making Room: The Human Face of Housing Affordability in BC's Capital Region*, to coincide with Housing Affordability Week and the trust fund campaign. The report received widespread attention and was received as both a credible and a moving representation of the seriousness of housing issues in the region.

The partnerships that HAP members had nurtured over the years, including with the CHALLENGE, and the ability of the CHALLENGE to link its research and awareness-raising effort strategically to the policy change initiative, allowed for a significant systemic change to be realized in relation to affordable housing in the region. Initially, municipalities committed \$638,256 annually to the fund. That amount is growing as additional municipalities agree to participate. It is expected that the fund will be able to leverage as much as 15 times its own resources in contributions from other levels of government and the private sector. In its first year, 32 affordable housing units have been built and many more are expected to follow.

#### *Government Support for Housing in Saint John: The Power of Speaking as a Community*

An initiative in Saint John further illustrates the power of multisectoral collaboration. Saint John is one of the oldest cities in Canada. It also has an aging housing stock. Much of the housing in several high poverty neighbourhoods in the city is in need of repair or replacement. Unfortunately, there has been a particularly low rate of new affordable housing development in the city for years.

In preparation for a consultation with (then) federal Minister of Housing, Joe Fontana, community partners with an interest in poverty and housing met and agreed on two things. First, they decided that they would make a presentation to the Minister as one community group. Second, they determined that they would make just one 'ask' of the Minister: that Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) dedicate one full-time employee to the task of helping the community build momentum for major new affordable housing development in Saint John. Based on this intervention, an official was subsequently appointed and already has made major contributions to housing development in the city. Funds for building 100 new affordable units have been approved and similar amounts are anticipated in subsequent years. In addition, CMHC has played an active role in supporting major new efforts to revitalize high-poverty neighbourhoods in the city. Finally, there is renewed energy in the efforts of the federal and provincial governments to work together and with others to address the housing challenges in Saint John.

### *Edmonton's Make Tax Time Pay Campaign: Partnering for Results*

The Make Tax Time Pay campaign undertaken by Vibrant Communities Edmonton (VCE) illustrates how the presence of a multisectoral collaboration can result in a wide range of partners coming together to make a valuable initiative happen.

The campaign grew out of an issue raised by a provincial government official with the Department of Human Resources and Employment who sits on VCE's Leadership Council. This official noted the low uptake of the Alberta Child Health Benefit and suggested that VCE might be able to help the department to address that issue. VCE subsequently researched the issue, developed a campaign strategy and engaged its network of partners in government, the nonprofit sector, business and low-income groups to play specific roles in carrying it out. The eventual campaign expanded the original idea to enhance the uptake of seven benefits, subsidies or tax credits provided by either the provincial or federal governments. In its first year it resulted in more than 200 applications being submitted to access the various programs. It also led to ongoing discussions about the possibility of including a check box on income tax forms that would expedite access to these programs in the future.

### *Fair Fares in Calgary: Building Networks and Know-How for Policy Change*

Through its Fair Fares initiative, Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) has demonstrated how the extended community networks and growing capacity of a multisectoral partnership can bring about change. It also has shown how such initiatives can build one initiative on another to reinforce the outcomes being sought.

For years, members of the disability community in Calgary had been advocating for reduced fare transit passes through the Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes. Links between this group and VCC were established during an earlier VCC effort to enable nonprofit groups and the provincial government to work together on reforming the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program, a provincial income security program for persons with disabilities. Drawing in part on lessons learned through the AISH initiative and the credibility that this effort had helped to build, VCC joined forces with the transit pass group to seek municipal government support for 'fair fares.' In addition to proposing a new name, 'Fair Fares Calgary' that immediately communicated the core of the group's message, VCC drew upon its network of partners to help give the issue broader support and a new profile. It helped organize a successful letter- and postcard-writing campaign that included expressions of support from a number of high-profile participants in Vibrant Communities Calgary. VCC has also participated directly in making the case to the City for reduced rate transit passes for all Calgarians living on low incomes. The result originally was a commitment by the City to establish such a pass for persons with disabilities and subsequently a decision to extend the reduced rate pass to all low-income residents, approximately 35,000 Calgarians.

## *A New Commercial Centre in Saint-Michel: Joint Action to Address Multiple Goals*

Finally, in Saint-Michel, an exciting initiative is now under way to strengthen the relationship between the City of Montréal and the neighbourhood renewal efforts of *Vivre Saint-Michel en santé*. It represents an important development in the local effort to substantially expand the range of relationships supporting *Vivre Saint-Michel's* grassroots neighbourhood work, including partnerships with business and other important institutions based outside the neighbourhood – notably, the City.

The initiative emerged when leaders of the Saint-Michel collaboration learned that a major new shopping centre was to be developed on a key piece of land in the neighbourhood, albeit without input or involvement from local residents. An intervention was subsequently made with the Mayor to ensure that the growing multisectoral partnership that *Vivre Saint-Michel* was building would have a seat at the table along with the City and private developers to make sure that the commercial development was undertaken in ways that helped counter poverty and social exclusion in the neighbourhood. The project is now being conceived not simply as a private development but as a collaborative effort that specifically targets economic and social benefits for local residents.

Key to bringing about this change in orientation was the substantial work already underway in Saint-Michel to develop such partnerships in support of an ambitious plan for neighbourhood revitalization. These efforts and the support of other partners in the initiative, such as *Centraide du Grand Montréal*, provided *Vivre Saint-Michel* with the credibility needed to secure standing with the City and others involved in the project.

Just a few of the 21 stories documented to date, these examples illustrate in tangible terms how the comprehensive, multisectoral approach is providing the awareness-raising, relationship-building, problem-solving and clout needed to address poverty issues in Trail Builder communities.

### ***Overall Architecture***

While work at the community level is at the core of Vibrant Communities, the overall architecture of the initiative is vital as well. In addition to connecting people across sectors and spheres of activity locally, Vibrant Communities fosters linkages among communities across the country and between local communities and institutions operating at other levels. Re-working the circuitry in all these respects is part of the effort to enhance the capacity for collaborative governance of issues related to poverty.

Although local communities can play an important role in countering poverty, they possess only some of the resources and levers required. Connections with other communities engaged in similar work multiply each community's capacity to understand the challenges involved and generate effective responses. Likewise, strong two-way relationships between communities and enabling institutions,

such as governments and funders, are critical if the ‘whole system’ is to achieve a new capacity for dealing with the diverse and interrelated causes of poverty.

Vibrant Communities contributes to building these links in three ways: it explores how diverse communities from across the country can support one another in a process of learning and change, it seeks new ways to link communities and enabling institutions, and it models a way to conduct initiatives involving national and local partners.

The three national sponsors each play significant roles in this regard. The McConnell Foundation brings not only crucial funding support to the initiative but also extensive experience disseminating innovative ideas on a national basis and important links to other funders. As a national community-building intermediary, Tamarack contributes a depth of knowledge about community-based practices and ways to support community learning both on a local and a Pan-Canadian basis. Finally, the Caledon Institute brings extensive experience bridging the gap between governments and communities so that community-based strategies and insights can inform and shape public policy.

### *Pan-Canadian Learning*

In many respects the Pan-Canadian Learning Community (PCLC) is the glue that binds Vibrant Communities partners together. It embodies the shared interest in learning about new and effective ways for countering poverty.

The PCLC is vital to the work of Vibrant Communities because it encourages a culture of learning among all involved and because it provides a practical mechanism for enhancing the capacity for learning. In other words, the PCLC is not just a means to help communities and sponsors develop an initial capacity for undertaking comprehensive, multisectoral strategies for poverty reduction; it is a tool for enabling the kind of learning that is needed for responding effectively to the changing conditions of poverty on an ongoing basis.

The PCLC is essentially a storehouse of experience, ideas and expertise through which participants can continually refresh their own thinking, stay abreast of emerging challenges and strategies, and join with peers to grapple with the issues they face. It facilitates the ongoing learning that allows communities to respond quickly and effectively to new issues as well as to deepen their knowledge of the core processes involved in comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives for poverty reduction.

In a mid-term evaluation, PCLC members specifically identified that the learning community helps to overcome the isolation that community groups often experience. It also has given them access to high-quality information and insights from one another, from national sponsors and from other resource people. Pan-Canadian learning was seen as having been helpful in such areas as: identifying local issues and priorities, building comprehensive poverty reduction strategies, engaging partners from diverse sectors and tackling practical concerns such as fundraising.

The vitality of Pan-Canadian learning can be seen clearly in a Tamarack reflection on the value of networks (see Exhibit VI).

Several themes have emerged from evaluations conducted with PCLC participants. First, there is a challenge to ensure that specific learning sessions are of practical relevance to the communities involved. On the whole, communities prefer customized and ‘just in time’ learning that addresses the specific issues they are facing. Since diverse communities are concerned with different issues or with the same issues at different times, it can be difficult to organize learning events that are relevant to all involved. Coaching support is a valuable and valued complement to other aspects of the PCLC since it allows for learning to be tailored to the needs of individual communities.

In some respects, this challenge may be cyclical in nature. The interests of Trail Builders tend to converge more around process issues and diverge somewhat around the more substantive poverty reduction strategies they are pursuing. As a result, during their initial development phase, Trail Builders faced a variety of common concerns related to engaging partners, facilitating collaboration and designing governance structures. As they moved into implementation, however, the focus of energy shifted to their respective poverty reduction strategies pertaining to employment, training and education, housing, transportation, human resource practices and income supports among others. It is possible that when process issues re-emerge, such as how to make these initiatives sustainable beyond their initial mandates, then a more widely shared learning agenda will be easier to construct.

A second challenge pertains to the general preference for face-to-face learning over electronic learning. While participants consistently find face-to-face learning opportunities more dynamic and productive, there are practical limits to arranging such sessions (and financing them). A variety of adjustments have been made in the design of tele-learning calls to maximize their effectiveness, including reducing the amount of general reporting and updating they involve, ensuring that there are opportunities for peer learning in virtually all calls and allowing smaller groups of communities to come together around topics of particular interest to them. However, additional ways to provide for face-to-face learning, for instance, through regional in addition to national events is being considered.

A third concern has been the balance between learning that is conceptual in nature and learning that pertains more specifically to the practice of comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives. In the early stages of Vibrant Communities, much of the learning was geared to exploring the major concepts around which the initiative was organized. However, as communities became increasingly engaged in practical efforts to apply these concepts, the emphasis gradually shifted. More recently, the learning has reflected a combination of concepts and practical approaches for putting them to use in real life settings.

Related to this latter concern, there also has been a consistent desire for peer learning as opposed to learning centred on outside experts. Especially as the Trail Builder initiatives have evolved, communities have been aware of the practical insights they were gaining from their own work and increasingly desired opportunities for sharing them with others – and for learning from others in return. This focus has been more and more apparent in PCLC activities and will undoubtedly continue to expand as the range and depth of practical experiences grow.

## *Exhibit VI – Does a Network Matter?*

**From:** *Mark Cabaj, Tamarack*  
**To:** *Vibrant Communities Steering Committee*  
**Date:** *November 25, 2005*

Had to share to these observations while they were fresh in my mind. They have to do with how one simple day of hosting Peter Papp [Executive Director, Opportunities Niagara] here in Edmonton demonstrated to me the real value of networks, particularly the kind we have structured in Vibrant Communities. The events unfold at Vibrant Communities Edmonton's monthly leadership meeting.

As the meeting starts, Peter is connecting with VC Edmonton staff to share his fundraising package – shaped with support by Wayne Hussey [fundraising coach arranged through Tamarack]. VC Edmonton welcomes the package noting that he has 'saved them a lot of work.' Peter just sent the package to VC Calgary as well.

Then the meeting begins. In the background, a video of VC Edmonton's launch is playing. It opens with a series of good news stories from Leadership Council members. The Program Director from the Edmonton Community Foundation relates how she received a call from a Community Foundation colleague in another VC site after co-presenting Edmonton's 'learning plan' during a PCLC tele-conference the previous week. They had a great chat and agreed to work more closely on poverty and social justice issues, and to explore further links between Community Foundations of Canada and VC at an upcoming meeting in Edmonton.

The next item on the agenda is a presentation by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) on how CRA's free tax clinics work as part of the CRA and VC Edmonton 'Make Tax Time Pay' campaign. After several minutes, the CRA representatives exclaims, "We are very grateful to VC Edmonton. We have been trying to provide these benefits to hard-to-reach communities for a long time, but without success. We've managed now to connect with some almost overnight thanks to this network." Jenny Kain from the City of Edmonton [co-convenor of VC Edmonton] then observes that, thanks to national VC sponsors, particularly Caledon, they are now working with someone in the national CRA office to get tax forms in Alberta upgraded so that people can automatically apply for a whole series of benefits rather than one at a time. A previous conversation with Jenny confirms that the Make Tax Time Pay campaign was prompted, in part, by two earlier Vibrant Communities efforts – a Caledon story written about a similar initiative undertaken by Opportunities Waterloo Region and a PCLC tele-learning series called the Sustainable Income Learning Initiative.

As the delegation leaves the room, Peter leans over and says, "This is brilliant. I think we are going to do this in Niagara." He tucks the Make Tax Time Pay campaign package in his briefcase.

It is now Peter's turn to present. As he is introduced, one VC Edmonton member confirmed how she loved the Caledon paper on Niagara's CAW housing project because it really showed how a

network could ‘untie local knots’ and helped her better appreciate the potential of VC Edmonton. Peter then described a customized training and transportation project where Opportunities Niagara helped bring together tourism companies, the region, municipalities and the local college in a pilot project linking social assistance recipients with good paying jobs – and demonstrating ways to improve inter-municipal transportation in Niagara Region.

During the conversation, it becomes clear that transportation is a workforce development issue in Edmonton as well: the public system is barely keeping up with the massive urban sprawl prompted by the latest Edmonton boom and is designed, in any case, to get people from the suburbs to city center, but not out to the margins of the city where the jobs are. The co-chair of VC Edmonton – Wayne Shillington, President of Norquest College – confirms that he sits on the City’s Transportation Committee. He and one of the councilors on the committee have identified transportation as a key workforce issue. He commits to connecting with the councillor to push this item further and to explore Niagara’s approach more fully.

The next item on the agenda is an update on VC Edmonton’s exploration of the Social Purchasing Portal (SPP). The Leadership Council approves a motion for staff to scope out the possibility of an Edmonton project. If it goes ahead, Edmonton will be the latest PCLC member to undertake such an initiative – along with Calgary, Surrey, Victoria and Waterloo. The SPP concept was introduced to PCLC members through a teleconference arranged 18 months earlier with SPP’s founder.

The agenda finishes with Jenny Kain describing how she has pulled together a description of municipal government involvement in VC initiatives across the country. Within minutes, we agree that Tamarack will explore with Caledon hosting a call with municipal representatives in VC communities and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

I am now ready to go, but Peter and Wayne are exchanging strategies about how to get councillors in Edmonton and Niagara to connect on how and why to support VC-like initiatives. They then drift into ideas Peter may bring back to Niagara on how Edmonton colleges are assisting immigrants with settlement and employment issues...

As we leave the meeting, Peter says, “Boy, that is a great way to run a leadership meeting. I’m going to talk to the chair of our Leadership Roundtable and make some changes.”

It was a very quick 90 minutes. There were other items on the agenda. But what a rapid fire way to realize the value of Vibrant Communities – all the components from networking, funders’ clout, policy links, tele-learning and peer support.

This project makes a real difference on the ground.

While participants have affirmed the value of the PCLC and its various supports, lessons are still being learned about learning itself. There are significant challenges involved in undertaking learning on a Pan-Canadian basis, all the more so in relation to a dynamic and evolving body of work such as that being pursued by Vibrant Communities. The PCLC has continuously been adjusted in terms of both the processes used and the substantive topics addressed in response to the needs of participants – and this process of adjustment shows every sign of continuing.

One step taken to help ensure that practice-oriented, peer learning is supported has been the creation of ‘community of practice’ groups on various topics, such as living wage campaigns, and learning and evaluation issues. These learning groups are explicitly intended to be driven by the practical concerns of participating communities and to emphasize peer learning as their predominant mode of operation.

Finally, there has been a recurring concern about the time required to take full advantage of PCLC learning opportunities. Already stretched to meet the demands of their respective initiatives, local convenors have struggled with information and learning overload. Communities and national sponsors have grappled with ways to limit and focus the range of PCLC learning activities, while also responding effectively to the wide range of learning interests expressed by various partners. Some communities have begun to devote resources specifically to their initiatives’ overall learning plans, for instance by putting in place learning coordinators whose role is to help develop local learning agendas, engage a wider array of participants in the learning process and work with national partners to link local and Pan-Canadian learning agendas. Stronger development of these local learning plans is seen as a key to addressing many of the challenges the PCLC has encountered. Such plans will help to ensure that there is an appropriate infrastructure in communities to manage the substantial time and energy commitments that such learning entails. They also will help to ensure that a strong learning culture exists both nationally and locally, and that the national learning agenda is solidly rooted in the learning needs of local partners.

While the value of the PCLC is not in doubt, adjusting it to meet the needs of participants is a continual work in progress. To date, many small adjustments have been made in the basic mechanisms and processes it entails. It remains to be seen if more fundamental re-design might help to address the cluster of challenges that have now been identified.

### *Enabling Institutions*

Included in the Pan-Canadian Learning Community have been learning opportunities intended to build bridges between the work of local communities and that of enabling institutions, such as government and funders. As discussed, the Caledon Institute facilitated an 18-month ‘policy dialogue’ involving community representatives and government officials, primarily from a series of federal government departments but including some provincial and municipal officials as well. More recently, Tamarack, Caledon and Human Resources and Social Development Canada have partnered to develop a Government Learning Circle to look more closely at the ways governments at all levels can support the work of Vibrant Communities and the ‘communities agenda’ more generally.

Caledon and Tamarack have also conducted a learning series featuring Trail Builder initiatives related to policy change. The goal of the series has been to mine lessons from these experiences in order to strengthen the ongoing involvement of communities in policy development.

In addition, Tamarack and the McConnell Foundation developed the Funders Network to familiarize funders with comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives. Through a series of tele-learning events,

funders had the opportunity to consider the value and dynamics of such initiatives and to consider the implications for their roles.

What has emerged from these efforts has been a clearer recognition of the ways in which the activities of governments, funders and communities are intimately connected – both in terms of goals and in terms of process. All are implicated in the fractured resources and responses that have hampered past efforts to deal with the complexities of poverty, and all face significant challenges moving toward new modes of collaborative governance.

As Jay Connor noted in his discussions with members of the Funders Network, a crucial starting point is simply to refocus energy and attention around the higher aspirations that partners share. From that beginning, it is possible to explore substantially new ways of working together that can better achieve those desired results.

Fundamentally what is needed are high engagement policy-makers and funders to join with community partners in the search for deep solutions to complex problems. This means engaging one another on relatively new terms – as partners and co-learners – around a mutual commitment to high goals, with a strong level of trust and with a relatively long-term focus and commitment.

Fortunately, such high engagement policy makers and funders do exist and Vibrant Communities already has benefited from their involvement, both locally and nationally. The more difficult challenge is to find ways to move beyond the institutional norms and practices that too often bind and frustrate the most dedicated civil servants and funding partners.

The task, of course, is not simply to eliminate established norms and practices, many of which serve important and necessary purposes. Rather, the task is to distinguish between which norms and practices are useful (and under what circumstances) and those which are not, and to develop new ways of doing things that better serve intended purposes.

Already a good deal is known about the problems from top down decision-making to siloed policy and delivery systems to short-term, project specific funding. There are also a growing number of examples of how governments, funders and communities are working in new and more productive ways. In fact, Vibrant Communities Trail Builders themselves already have generated significant examples of how productive links with both governments and funders can be made: funding partners who not only contribute financially but also sit at the table problem-solving, learning and using their influence to engage other partners; and government partners who ‘work the system’ to better support communities and to serve the mandates of their respective agencies.

The challenge as this work continues is to harness and focus these positive beginnings in order to specify and promote norms and practices that allow comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to realize their potential.

## *Modelling National/Local Collaboration*

A few key principles have guided Vibrant Communities as a partnership between national sponsors and local communities. Most of all, national sponsors have supported a community-driven approach. This principle recognizes the distinctive nature of individual communities. If the broad approaches being explored are to have real value, communities must be able to adapt them in ways that suit their local circumstances. Accordingly, rather than narrowly specifying the initiative's goals, strategies and time frames, the Vibrant Communities national framework set out overarching themes and objectives. Moreover, this guiding framework has been discussed and revised by national sponsors and community partners at the outset of the initiative and at points along the way.

On the one hand, the broad framework serves to focus the work of the initiative and ensure a shared understanding among all involved. On the other, it provides local communities with the flexibility to pursue these themes in terms appropriate to local realities. Furthermore, the initiative's strong focus on learning supports communities to grapple with the practical challenges they face and generate appropriate responses rather than hold to a set of prescribed strategies.

Governance of the overall initiative has been conducted on a collaborative basis. Although the sponsors retain a significant degree of formal decision-making power with respect to the national initiative, in practice decisions are made through extensive dialogue among the various partners. While sponsors and partners have most often shared common views of important issues related to the initiative, there have been instances where they held significantly different perspectives. Tensions around such issues have been used to push for deeper understanding and constructive solutions. In this respect, differences in views and priorities can be seen as an asset. Local partners and sponsors are differently positioned in relation to the work and may therefore provide important checks on one another's assessment of what is necessary for its advancement.

Another basic feature of the overall design has been the use of matched funds. While the McConnell Foundation provides substantial financial support to each of the Trail Builders, that funding is structured in the form of matching dollars. This arrangement ensures that local Trail Builders develop the fundraising capacity important for their long-term viability. It also helps ensure that their work is well supported within their communities and regions. Finally, it prevents local initiatives from being overly reliant on any one funder.

Ultimately, the matched funding arrangement, as with other principles and practices guiding the initiative, serves to maintain the foundation of partnership between national sponsors and communities and helps create the conditions that allow for open dialogue around the substance of the work. Such principles and practices are important for future initiatives that seek to maximize the contributions that national and local partners can make to solving complex problems.

## *Part Three: Opening a New Chapter*

In many respects, Vibrant Communities chapter one has been a process of exploration. A set of promising approaches to poverty reduction were identified and mechanisms established for national and local partners to learn together how they could be applied in diverse local contexts. The focus was on determining the possibilities: To what extent was a comprehensive, multisectoral approach viable in diverse settings and under the guidance of different leadership groups? How might the initiatives unfold differently in various contexts? What kinds of outcomes might these initiatives achieve? How might a Pan-Canadian initiative support the efforts of its various members?

Based on the experience of the past four years, we now can offer at least preliminary responses to these basic questions. It is clear that the general approach is viable in significantly distinct local environments and where leadership groups have unique perspectives and priorities. It also is evident that common principles can play out in a variety of forms in many respects – e.g., the geographic scale in which initiatives operate, the time frames in which they see their work taking place, the key roles they see the collaboration playing, the specific low-income groups they seek to support and the types of poverty reduction interventions they pursue. We also know that these initiatives have demonstrated the capacity to generate tangible benefits for substantial numbers of low-income residents. Finally, we have developed a set of mechanisms and supports that participants have found to be of value in facilitating their local efforts and enabling them to support one another.

Building on this foundation, the next chapter in Vibrant Communities' work appears to be about refining and deepening what we have learned so that even more substantial outcomes may be achieved.

While all aspects of the initiative are a continual work in progress, several areas seem to warrant special attention as Vibrant Communities prepares for a new round of activity: our growing appreciation of poverty as a 'complex problem,' the initiative's conception of poverty and poverty reduction, approaches to 'comprehensiveness' in these initiatives, participation of low-income residents, the challenge of achieving deep and durable results for people seeking to exit poverty and efforts to strengthen the enabling environment for this work. Each area poses important questions for Vibrant Communities in the period ahead.

### *Poverty as a Complex Problem*

From the outset of Vibrant Communities, poverty has been recognized in general terms as a complex problem. However, the literature on complex issues combined with the experience of the initial Trail Builders has begun to generate a more precise appreciation for the nature of complexity. In the period ahead, the practical significance of poverty as a complex problem will have to be addressed more fully. What are the dynamics of a complex problem that make it different from other problems? Are there particular techniques or strategies that are appropriate for countering this type of problem? How can the basic capacities of comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives be refined to tackle the distinct challenges associated with complex issues?

## *Poverty and Poverty Reduction*

In the context of comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives, conceptualizing key terms such as poverty and poverty reduction poses special challenges. By their nature, these initiatives seek to engage partners with substantially different backgrounds and interests. These differences may well mean that participants hold quite distinct perspectives on the nature of poverty and on strategies for addressing it. In part, the task of local initiatives is to find common ground that enables partners to work together. In other words, the challenge of defining poverty and poverty reduction is as much (or more) a social as an intellectual one.

Recognizing this reality, national sponsors adopted a minimalist approach to defining poverty and poverty reduction for the Pan-Canadian initiative. On the one hand, where a standard measure of poverty was needed for tracking results, sponsors chose to use the low income cut-off, the most generally recognized measure of low income in Canada. On the other, it described poverty reduction in terms of a series of practical results that most people would recognize as contributing to a household's efforts to exit poverty: improved training and education, new or improved employment, increased incomes and financial assets, affordable housing and other measures that contribute directly to these other benefits. Within this broad framework, local initiatives were encouraged to formulate their own more precise understandings of poverty and poverty reduction.

During a recent consultation process, many participants identified a desire to revisit the conceptions of poverty and poverty reduction guiding the overall initiative. There was a sense there were now a range of meanings being used and that the work would benefit from a clarification of these key concepts – both for internal purposes and for communicating about the initiative with others. Moreover, based on their involvement to date, partners throughout the initiative have refined and elaborated their ideas about the nature of poverty and poverty reduction. Consolidating these insights can strengthen the future work and renew the focus of the initiative.

## *Approaches to Comprehensiveness*

While comprehensive thinking and action have always been one of the core approaches being explored by Vibrant Communities, it has become apparent that there are more 'limited' and more 'extensive' approaches to pursuing comprehensiveness. Further discussion is needed about the value of these different approaches.

The more limited version of comprehensiveness emphasizes comprehensive thinking as a way to identify 'high impact' strategies for reducing poverty. In this view, a multisectoral collaboration is important because it brings together people familiar with many different factors that influence poverty. Such a collaboration can pinpoint where strategic interventions might be made in order to make a significant contribution to poverty reduction.

The more extensive version of comprehensiveness is less focused on bringing about individual 'high impact' strategies and more concerned with developing an integrated overall system for addressing the root

causes of poverty. In this view, a multisectoral collaboration is able to bring together diverse partners to gradually achieve a wide array of changes (some big, some small) that result in a more effective overall system of responses to poverty.

The focus of attention can vary quite a bit between these two different perspectives. While some participants may feel that pinpointing high-impact interventions is adequate in itself, others believe that the potential of comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives to build well-integrated systems of response is not being realized to its full extent.

### *Participation of Low-Income Residents*

All Trail Builders have engaged low-income leaders as partners in their work. Nevertheless, the extent of low-income participation has remained a concern. For some Trail Builders, the insights of low-income residents have been given a central place in shaping their overall plans and specific strategies. In others, low-income involvement has been more limited. For the next round of Vibrant Communities, a number of questions warrant consideration: What difference are Trail Builders finding when they do make the experience of low-income residents central to the development of their initiatives? What are the various ways that low-income leaders can provide that input? Besides participating on the initiative's leadership body, what other avenues can be pursued to ensure that poverty reduction initiatives reflect the lived realities of people with a firsthand experience of poverty?

### *Deep and Durable Results*

Based on the first round of Vibrant Communities' work, it is clear that such initiatives can generate benefits for a significant number of low-income households. However, it is not yet evident whether they can produce results that are deep and durable as well. In the next period, Vibrant Communities will have to address this question. Doing so likely implies other issues, including the question of comprehensiveness and the role of low-income residents in helping to identify issues and responses. A focus on deep and durable results also poses important challenges in terms of conceptualizing the poverty reduction process and tracking the results achieved over time.

### *Strengthening the Enabling Environment*

In its first period, Vibrant Communities raised the awareness of other key players, such as governments and funders, about the potential of comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives for poverty reduction. In addition, some of the most effective strategies pursued by Trail Builders involved influencing public policies of various kinds. In the next round of its work, Vibrant Communities appears to have the potential to significantly advance its poverty reduction efforts by realizing more fully the supports that governments and funders can make to these community-based initiatives, both to the infrastructure needed

to carry out this work and for specific poverty reduction strategies. Among the practices to be developed more fully are longer-term, more flexible funding; improved ways to combine funding streams to support comprehensive strategies; closer collaboration between policy-makers and communities on policy development; and policy changes to remove barriers or realize opportunities that support poverty reduction.

While many aspects of Vibrant Communities continue to evolve, these areas represent some of the key issues to advance its work in the period ahead.

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## Appendix

### Documenting Vibrant Communities (2002-2006)

The first round of Vibrant Communities's work has been extensively documented. The following list includes synthesis reports and community stories describing various aspects of the work to date. Still other papers explore various conceptual and practical issues associated with comprehensive, multisectoral strategies for poverty reduction. All papers are available on the Vibrant Communities ([www.vibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca)) and Caledon ([www.caledoninst.org](http://www.caledoninst.org)) websites.

#### **Synthesis Reports – Describing and analyzing the work of Vibrant Communities Trail Builders**

*In From the Field: Exploring the First Poverty Reduction Strategies Undertaken by Trail Builders in the Vibrant Communities Initiative*

Mark Cabaj, Anne Makhoul and Eric Leviten-Reid, June 2006

*Understanding the Potential and Practice of Multisectoral, Comprehensive Efforts to Reduce Poverty: The Preliminary Experiences of the Vibrant Communities Trail Builders*

Mark Cabaj and Eric Leviten-Reid, June 2006

#### **Trail Builder Theory of Change Stories – Stories presenting the theory change guiding each of the Trail Builder initiatives**

*Opportunities Niagara: Untying the Knots, Connecting the Dots*

Anne Makhoul and Eric Leviten-Reid, May 2006

*Le Chantier in Saint-Michel – Tackling Poverty and Social Inclusion*

Anne Makhoul, Dal Broadhead and Eric Leviten-Reid, March 2006

*Vibrant Communities Saint John: Dismantling the Poverty Traps*

Anne Makhoul and Eric Leviten-Reid, March 2006

*Vibrant Communities Edmonton: Building Family Economic Success*

Anne Makhoul and Eric Leviten-Reid, February 2006

*Vibrant Communities Calgary: Awareness, Engagement and Policy Change*  
Anne Makhoul and Eric Leviten-Reid, January 2006

*Quality of Life CHALLENGE: Fostering Engagement, Collaboration and Inclusion*  
Eric Leviten-Reid and Anne Makhoul, November 2005

**Community Stories – Stories discussing selected poverty reduction  
strategies undertaken by Vibrant Communities Trail Builders**

*Vibrant Communities Edmonton's Make Tax Time Pay Campaign*  
Anne Makhoul, February 2006

*Fair Fares Calgary Celebrates Reduced Fare Transit Passes*  
Anne Makhoul, November 2005

*Victoria's Regional Housing Trust Fund: So Far, So Good*  
Anne Makhoul, November 2005

*Local Heroes: CAW 199 and Community Partners*  
Anne Makhoul, September 2005

*The Living Wage Learning Initiative*  
Anne Makhoul, May 2005

*Community Action in Saint John: Making a Difference in the Lives of Young People*  
Anne Makhoul, May 2005

*Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Public Policy Initiative*  
Anne Makhoul, May 2005

*Quality of Life CHALLENGE in Victoria Invites Low-income Canadians to Speak for Themselves*  
Anne Makhoul, April 2005

*Waterloo Region's Guaranteed Income Supplement Campaign*  
Anne Makhoul, January 2005