



Comprehensive Strategies for Deep and Durable Outcomes

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Purpose of this Paper

This paper is part of Vibrant Communities’ continuing effort to strengthen the knowledge and practice of comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction. Its purpose is to examine the idea of ‘comprehensiveness’ in order to clarify some of the conceptual and practical issues it involves.

More than a discussion paper, this document is meant to provide a conceptual lens to support ongoing research. Over the next three years, approximately 12 in-depth case studies will be conducted of ‘comprehensive strategies for poverty reduction.’ Each case study will explore the notion of comprehensiveness, the context in which the strategy took shape, the particular way in which the strategy unfolded, the results achieved and the lessons learned. Together, the case studies will help us to test the proposition that comprehensive strategies are effective at generating deep and durable outcomes: Is this the case? If so, to what extent and under what conditions are such strategies able to generate substantial, long-term impacts with respect to poverty reduction?

Background

Our current interest in comprehensive strategies stems from two observations made about the work in Vibrant Communities ‘chapter one’ (2002-2006). First, based on the results achieved by Trail Builders, partners felt confident concluding that these types of initiatives are able to achieve large scale impact. In a relatively short amount of time, the six Trail Builder communities had produced benefits for approximately 32,000 low-income households.¹ On the other hand, many of the benefits achieved were modest in nature. Whether such initiatives are able to produce deep and durable impacts was recognized as an open question.

Second, despite a strong focus on comprehensive thinking and action, some partners questioned whether we were, in fact, seeing the kind of ‘integrated’ strategies that were anticipated. While all Trail Builder communities addressed ‘multiple root causes’ of poverty, many seemed to tackle these issues more or less in isolation from one another. This raised the question for some whether the full potential of comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives was being realized. In order to achieve deep and durable impacts, is more attention needed to developing integrated strategies? Or are there other ways of enacting comprehensive approaches that could achieve equal or better results?

Asking such questions has gradually revealed that the idea of ‘comprehensiveness’ – and our thinking about it within Vibrant Communities – is somewhat more complicated than we previously recognized. In fact, both in theory and practice, there are a number of ways of understanding comprehensive approaches, why they may be important for tackling complex issues such as poverty, and what they look like in action. This paper will tease out some of these ideas so that we can better consider their implications for our work. In the end, it does not present a unified theory of comprehensiveness so much as a series of conceptual distinctions that may help

in exploring real life cases. Those case studies, in turn, may lead to a more synthetic understanding of the issues involved.

The Impetus behind Comprehensive Approaches

Long a tenet of community work, the idea of comprehensiveness received renewed attention in the late 1980s with the emergence of ‘comprehensive community initiatives.’

In large measure, these initiatives were a reaction to the limitations of ‘categorical programs’ with their tight focus on specific issues. While effective in directing expertise and resources to particular concerns, such programs were problematic in other respects. Most of all, they defined problems in relatively narrow terms making it difficult to recognize or address the connections among them. Ultimately, they encouraged piecemeal responses to multifaceted challenges.

By contrast, comprehensive community initiatives intentionally set out to address a wide range of issues and their relationship to one another. As Lisbeth Schorr has written, such initiatives emerged in response to “accumulating evidence that services meant to improve the life prospects of the poor were often proving ineffective – at least in part because they were so fragmented” [Schorr 1997: 315]. They rejected the tendency to address issues such as poverty, employment, health, crime, education and housing in isolation from one another. Instead, they endorsed the idea that multiple and interrelated problems require multiple and interrelated solutions [Schorr 1997: 319].

For practically every family, then, the ingredients of poverty are part financial and part psychological, part personal and part societal, part past and part present. Every problem magnifies the impact of the others, and all are so tightly interlocked that one reversal can produce a chain reaction with results far distant from the original causes. A rundown apartment can exacerbate a child’s asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother’s punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing... If problems are interlocking, then so must solutions be. A job alone is not enough. Medical insurance alone is not enough. Good housing alone is not enough. Reliable transportation, careful family budgeting, effective parenting, effective schooling are not enough when each is achieved in isolation from the rest.

– *The Working Poor*, p. 11

On the whole, comprehensive community initiatives represented a shift in attention “from the frog to the ecosystem” [Connor and Kadel-Taras 2003: 7]: from seeing an issue of concern as an isolated reality to appreciating the web of relationships in which it exists.

Building on the work of comprehensive community initiatives, Vibrant Communities has increasingly drawn on thinking about ‘complex’ or ‘wicked’ problems to sharpen its understanding of the challenge being addressed and the potential value of comprehensive,

collaborative approaches. Elsewhere, we explore the topic of complex problems more fully [Cabaj forthcoming]. Here, however, we simply note the nature of the beast and several of the principles involved in addressing it.

In short, complex problems are not just more complicated than other problems; they are different in kind. What distinguishes them from ‘simple’ or ‘complicated’ problems is not the *number* of elements they involve but the *dynamic relationship* among those elements. The hallmark of complex problems is that they involve a wide range of factors that interact with one another to generate a constantly shifting set of issues and challenges. As a result, they can be addressed effectively only when an equally wide range of partners, each engaged with different aspects of the issue, work together to adjust and re-adjust how they affect one another through the decisions and actions they take [Leviten-Reid 2007: 15].

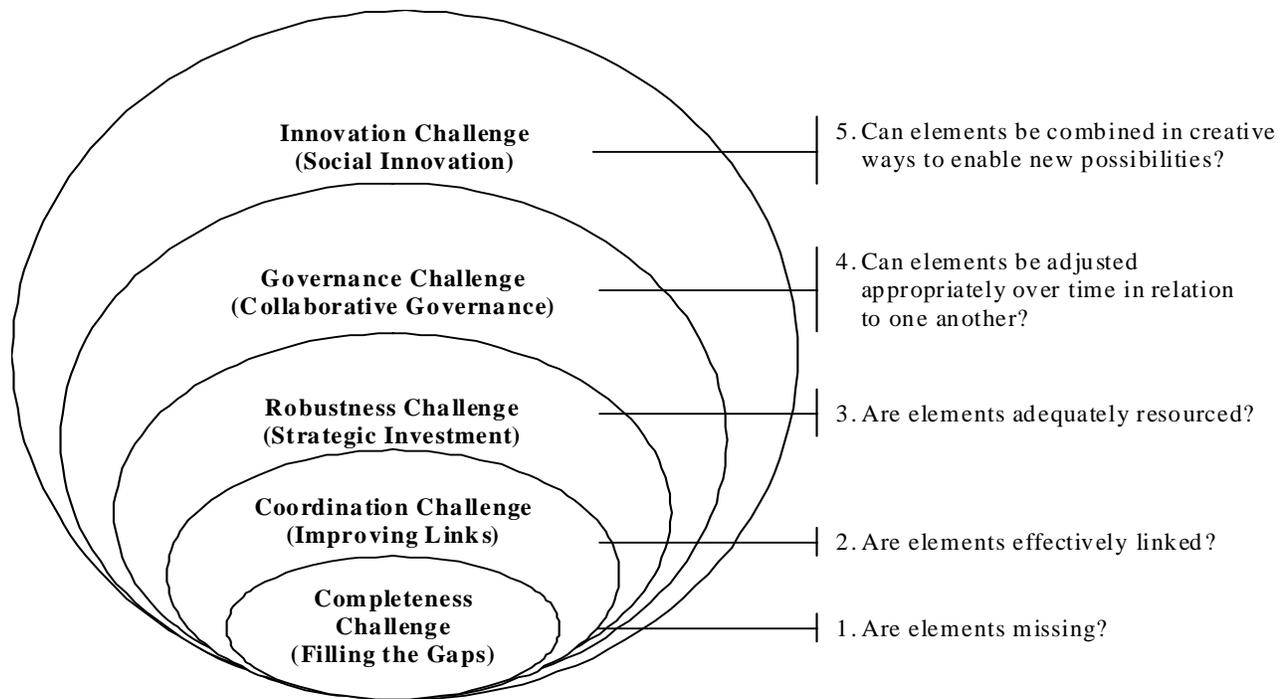
The result of this technical and social complexity is high and persistent uncertainty. In the literature, many of the principles for tackling complex problems suggest responses to the challenge of uncertainty:

1. *Build a good-enough vision* – In order to maintain flexibility in highly emergent circumstances, articulate ‘minimum specifications’ rather than detailed plans.
2. *Balance the use of ‘clockware’ (techniques geared to what is clear and agreed upon) and ‘swarmware’ (techniques geared to what is not)* – Recognize the value of data and intuition, planning and acting, safety and risk.
3. *Uncover and work with paradox and tension* – Rather than being stymied by confusion or conflict, embrace such moments as opportunities for creative breakthroughs.
4. *Explore multiple actions rather than trying to resolve the one right way* – Faced with the limits of certainty, experiment on multiple fronts in order to discover what works.
5. *Grow complex systems by chunking* – Don’t tackle everything at once; address a cluster of issues at a time and then link clusters together [derived from Zimmerman, Lindberg and Plsek 1998].

The lens of complexity offers a new vantage point on the work of comprehensive initiatives, one we will be exploring in the course of our case studies.

Layers of Comprehensiveness

If the shift in perspective from isolated issues to complex problems provides the basic impetus behind comprehensive initiatives, it turns out there are quite different ways to put that perspective into practice. Embedded in the idea of comprehensiveness are at least five different images of the challenge being addressed and the response required. Not entirely distinct from one another, these versions of comprehensiveness are like layers of an onion one enveloped in the other.



The layers of comprehensiveness will be discussed in terms of five distinct challenges and the strategies they recommend:

- A. The Completeness Challenge – Filling the Gaps
- B. The Coordination Challenge – Improving Links
- C. The Robustness Challenge – Strategic Investment
- D. The Governance Challenge – Collaborative Governance
- E. The Innovation Challenge – Social Innovation

Each also will be considered in terms of the demands it holds for implementation and its prospects for achieving deep and durable outcomes. These preliminary thoughts will be developed more fully as the case studies are completed.

A. The Completeness Challenge – Filling the Gaps

In dictionary terms, comprehensiveness means “covering everything, or almost everything” [Gage Canadian Dictionary]. Accordingly, the Completeness Challenge is concerned with whether all of the important pieces are present for tackling the issue at hand, in this case poverty in its various manifestations. For this type of comprehensiveness problem, the response called for is ‘filling the gaps.’

Not surprisingly, the Completeness Challenge can take many different forms. For instance, it could mean focusing on a particular demographic group whose concerns are not currently being addressed. It could mean recognizing that a particular steppingstone is missing in a given pathway out of poverty, e.g., credential recognition for highly trained immigrants. Or it could mean responding to a missing piece of institutional capacity. Each of these concerns is evident in the work of Vibrant Communities Trail Builders:

Thousands of professionals have been lured to Canadian cities like London with promises of lucrative careers and a prosperous, secure future in a new land. Once they get here, the reality is sobering. And dream-shattering.

– Armed with degrees, they drive our cars, January 17, 2004

- Vibrant Communities Edmonton identified early in its work that the challenges facing people working for low wages were largely unaddressed. Thus, it focused its attention on ways to assist this growing segment of the population.
- In its first phase, Opportunities Waterloo Region supported a number of initiatives to fill in steppingstones in various pathways out of poverty. The Welcome Aboard drop-in centre enabled people to escape the social isolation associated with poverty and begin to connect with programs and services meant to assist them; the Small Steps to Success pre-employment program helped women long removed from the workforce to build the self-awareness and self-esteem necessary to successfully re-enter the labour market; and the Job Enhancement Program helped the working poor to escape from part-time work or work outside of the field for which they were trained and move on to better, more satisfying positions.
- The Quality of Life CHALLENGE helped establish a Regional Housing Trust Fund in BC's Capital Region – an important mechanism through which municipal governments could leverage private and public money to develop new affordable housing.

At first blush, this gap filling approach may appear to promote isolated initiatives. However, it reflects a comprehensive approach in at least two important ways. First, comprehensive thinking about the local poverty situation is what allows specific points of intervention to be identified. Second, the intention of the specific initiatives is not simply to address the immediate issue but also to enhance the effectiveness of other aspects of the community's response to poverty: Opportunities and supports for the long-term unemployed are diminished if they only expand the ranks of the working poor. The contribution of other programs and services is undermined if a missing steppingstone stalls people in their movement out of poverty or even reverses the progress they have made. Adding a new institutional capacity to a community's tool box frequently reinforces the efforts of other existing structures.

In other words, while the initiatives are discrete, they are not necessarily isolated. They are undertaken out of awareness of the bigger picture and in an effort to augment the contributions of existing supports and opportunities.

In terms of implementation, gap filling strategies may offer advantages precisely because they are relatively discrete initiatives. As such, it may be easier to focus energy, articulate the initiative to others, manage the process and evaluate the outcomes. Furthermore, starting or adding something new often attracts more support than adjusting something that already exists. On the other hand, depending on the specific strategy, even a discrete initiative may be complicated to undertake. In addition, starting something new also involves hurdles. The opportunity or support may not already be in place because the needs of the group being assisted may not be considered a priority or because potential supporters need to be convinced of the intervention's effectiveness.

In terms of potential for deep and durable outcomes, the intervention itself may be sufficiently powerful that it can significantly enhance outcomes. This may be the case particularly where the group being assisted primarily faces one major hurdle targeted by the initiative – e.g., recent immigrants with high levels of education who principally need their qualifications to be recognized by specific employers. When the people to be assisted face multiple barriers, the question is more whether the intervention significantly enhances the effectiveness of adjacent areas of work – e.g., an effort to stabilize the housing circumstances of the homeless so that they might take part in other programs meant to assist them. If the spin-off effects are limited, then it is quite possible that the intervention will contribute to improved outcomes for such a group but not dramatically.

B. The Coordination Challenge – Improving Links

If the Completeness Challenge is concerned with whether all the pieces are present, the Coordination Challenge is concerned with whether those pieces are effectively linked with one another.

One of the common problems arising from fragmented responses to poverty is that people in need of assistance too often fall through the cracks in the system. In some instances, the challenge is finding the specific program or service appropriate to the circumstances of the individual or household involved. Fragmented systems of support present a complicated maze of programs making it difficult to know where to turn for the desired support. Even service providers can struggle to know where to refer people for the required assistance.

A second version of this problem involves individuals or households trying to deal with multiple challenges. Narrowly focused on their

Calgary has over 140 different non-profit agencies and government departments providing more than 2,000 programs and services for people experiencing homelessness. We need a coordinated approach to quickly, humanely and efficiently connect the homeless to these services and move them to safe, decent and affordable housing.

We must also break the bureaucratic stranglehold that bedevils our current system – a system in which the homeless cannot be housed until their situation has improved, but their situation cannot improve until they are housed. Traditional models place requirements on the homeless that limit their ability to establish a more stable and sustainable lifestyle.

– Calgary's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness, p. 8

respective concerns, the various organizations that play a role in poverty reduction – government, business, schools, non-profit organizations – may not coordinate their efforts in ways that enable people to obtain the combination or sequence of opportunities and supports they require. Inadequate referral systems and lack of integrated programming may mean that gains in one area, such as stabilized housing, are not complemented by support in other areas – such as training, education or employment assistance. Worse, in some situations, programs may actively undermine one another, for example, where an employment development program enables a family to increase its income only to have a social housing program reduce the subsidies that made its housing affordable.

Again, significant examples of linking strategies exist within Vibrant Communities and other similar efforts. For instance, through the Jobs Bus initiative, Opportunities Niagara helped connect a series of partners – a nonprofit employment assistance agency, municipal transit authority and private sector employers – to provide people with the training, transportation and employment opportunities they needed to secure good paying jobs. In Hamilton, the WrapAround project is bringing together a wide array of organizations and individuals to provide supports responsive to the needs and goals of participating individuals and families. A somewhat similar initiative is evident in Waterloo Region. Through its National Child Benefit Reinvestment plan, the Regional of Waterloo provided frontline community service organizations and neighbourhood centres with funds to hire community outreach workers. With their extensive knowledge of existing resources and their focus on addressing the specific circumstances of the families involved, outreach workers are facilitating access to the programs and services that people need [Social Planning, Policy and Program Administration 2007].

With respect to implementation, one strength of linking strategies is that they build on what already exists. This gives them ready support from the organizations directly involved. It also may make it easier to describe the problem being addressed and the benefits to be realized to other potential supporters. On the other hand, altering established practices can sometimes be more difficult than developing something altogether new. It requires some ‘un-learning’ on the part of those involved. Much depends on whether the organizations whose work is to be linked recognize the gains to be made and are prepared to make the adjustments required.

Especially where the people being assisted face multiple barriers, enhanced coordination may significantly improve impacts. Such linking may make the difference between someone stalling in their movement out of poverty (or even shifting into reverse), or continuing to make gains. When opportunities and support are well linked, they can reinforce one another to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts – i.e., enhanced self-esteem combined with tangible employment opportunities may help develop a worker whose growing confidence enhances job performance and success on the job confirms growing self-assurance. Of course, coordination in itself is no guarantee of deeper, more durable impact. Depending on the specific intervention, improved coordination may have dramatic or more marginal influence on outcomes.

C. The Robustness Challenge – Strategic Investment

Even when all the pieces are in place and are appropriately linked to one another, a community still may not be operating at full power when it comes to reducing poverty. The Robustness Challenge refers to circumstances where capacities are present but less fully developed than they might be either in terms of their reach (how many people they can assist) or their depth (the level of know-how accumulated and applied). Here the strategy is to support investment in this emerging community capacity in order to ‘scale it up’ and/or refine the knowledge and practice that it involves.

There are so few agencies/ services with workers whose time is devoted to helping a family in such a range of areas. Many families fall through the cracks of current services; there’s been little support as problems grew and now there’s a crisis.”

– Waterloo Region’s National Child Benefit Reinvestment Initiative, p. 25

In its early days, an important perception of Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) was that local community organizations possessed a significant emerging capacity to reduce poverty. However, many of these promising initiatives lacked the resources to pursue their work at full scale or to conduct the evaluation and other research that would allow them to move their efforts to the next level of effectiveness. This has remained an underlying premise of VCSJ’s work.

Another example pertains to literacy training and financial asset building in Edmonton. Here partners in Vibrant Communities Edmonton recognized the value of an existing program and decided to make it much more widely available. By engaging other partners to offer literacy training and by modifying the curriculum to suit the needs of different participants, it both expanded the reach of the program and refined its application.

When existing initiatives show promising results, they provide a solid basis for making the case for additional investment. However, even promising initiatives can struggle to influence those institutions that control the resources needed for scaling up or further development.

Depending on how it is directed, additional investment can improve impacts in two ways. It can simply expand a promising program so that the same benefits are experienced by more people. Or it can support learning and research that help move the work to a new level of impact. Of course, more investment does not necessarily mean better results. Investment can be done in ways that undermine the very qualities that led to success in the first place. For example, it may mean creating more rules and procedures when the keys to success were flexibility and responsiveness, or it may mean introducing rigid evaluation processes when the keys to success were continuous exploration and innovation.

D. The Governance Challenge – Collaborative Governance

Complex problems such as poverty are not static. Rather they involve a wide range of interacting factors that continuously re-shape the specific challenges involved. For example,

changing labour markets may dramatically reduce the number of ‘good jobs’ and increase the skill levels needed to attain them. New welfare-to-work policies can flood the market with people in search of entry level employment. Increases in housing prices can significantly affect what constitutes a ‘living wage.’ Urban sprawl can push new businesses seeking workers further and further away from inner-city residents seeking employment. In these and other ways, change in one sphere has an impact upon others altering the landscape for everyone involved.

A number of years ago, Emery and Trist used the term “turbulent” to describe social environments in which different spheres of action are intimately connected to one another. In the industrial era, they suggest, there were advantages for large, top-down, centralized organizations that were able to exert a high degree of control over their environments. However, when many such organizations all act independently in different directions, they tend to generate unintended consequences for themselves and others. What results is a “contextual commotion” as if the ground itself, not just the actors on it, is in motion. Only by joining with others with whom they are intrinsically connected can organizations hope to manage the uncertainties generated by such environmental turbulence [Trist 1997: 521]. In short, mechanisms for collaborative governance are needed so that a wide range of stakeholders can continuously adjust and re-adjust their activities in relation to one another.

Clearly, any initiative that takes a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction will foster collaboration as part of that effort. However, not all initiatives intentionally set out to create a new and enduring institutional capacity in this regard. Some approach their work as relatively conventional planning processes, bringing the appropriate players together to design and implement a more fully developed plan but not necessarily to create the underlying capacity to adjust and re-adjust that plan over an extended (even indefinite) period of time. Others see their work as relatively short-term campaigns meant to raise the profile of poverty, bring new players to the table and kick-start a more vigorous and innovative response. In comparison, the idea of collaborative governance presented here is meant to highlight a structural condition (the heightened state of social density as identified by Emery and Trist) that requires a new response capacity – i.e., ongoing institutional capacity to collaboratively govern complex issues such as poverty. Initiatives that conceive the challenge of comprehensiveness in these terms take on a distinct body of work. Collaboration, in this case, is not only a means to an end but also an end in itself.

Collaboration involves new ways of working. As one official in the City’s Community Services Department suggests, everyone at the Roundtable needs to hold up a mirror to ask themselves: “How will this change the way I work?” Joe-Anne Priel as the City’s lead representative and Co-Convener of the Roundtable, speaks about influencing policy change as one of her roles. She takes HRPR deliberations and directions back to the Corporate Management Table and identifies linkages, such as with the City’s Business Plan or between the City’s Economic Development Strategy and Social Development Strategy. In an example in late 2006, Priel ensured that the City’s homelessness strategy would align with the template and direction of the poverty strategy approach.

– *Shared Leadership – Collaborative Governance: Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, p. 7*

To some extent, strengthening the capacity for collaborative governance is a concern for all Vibrant Communities groups. However, some Trail Builders have made special efforts to explore this issue. For instance, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE has continuously sought to understand, apply and refine the principles that support a culture of shared leadership and collaboration. Vibrant Communities Edmonton has used a Partnership Self-Assessment Survey as a tool for reflecting on and improving the collaboration among its partners. Vibrant Communities Saint John has adjusted the design and function of its Leadership Roundtable to enhance its effectiveness, and is experimenting with an alternative staffing model meant to reinforce decentralized, community ownership. The Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction has continuously reflected on the role it plays in building enhanced ongoing community capacity to reduce poverty.

Efforts at collaborative governance may enjoy strong support from organizations that recognize the need to manage complex environments by working more closely with others. At the same time, developing collaborative governance requires a major investment of time and resources, including for mechanisms that can facilitate the process. In addition, it can be challenging to engage and maintain participation across a wide range of partners, especially on a long term basis.

While collaborative governance can generate significant impacts in the near term, it is particularly important for managing changes that occur in various parts of a complex system over the long term. Improved impact stems from the enhanced capacity to adjust and re-adjust the actions of various partners in relation to one another over time. Tracking the outcomes associated with collaborative governance, however, can be challenging as can attribution of responsibility for the results achieved.

E. The Innovation Challenge – Social Innovation

Although social environments are not static, they do involve dominant ways of thinking and acting that tend to limit the range of possibilities that may be considered and pursued. A final version of comprehensiveness focuses on the ‘big picture’ in order to identify those factors that keep things in their current pattern.

The notion here is that we live in a world of possible worlds where the elements that make up social reality can be combined in various ways to generate different effects. When one or another way of thinking or acting becomes dominant, it is as if a break is placed on this creative process. Social innovation is about recognizing the rules and relationships that hold the

Many social innovators are adept at seeing such patterns in the interactions around them. Just as a diviner with a willow rod can find water, a social innovator can home in on key simple rules and move to intervene. Bob Geldof saw a breakdown in connections between the disaffected youth who ‘consumed’ rock music and the dispossessed hungry in Ethiopia and Sudan who had nothing to eat; between those who wanted to help, including NGOs inhibited by cumbersome bureaucracy, and those who needed that help. He moved instinctively to rearrange those relationships – change those rules.

– *Getting to Maybe*, p. 43-44

**Table One – Modes of Comprehensiveness:
Strengths and Challenges**

Mode	Strength	Challenge
Filling the Gaps	<p><u>Implementation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easier to focus on discrete initiatives • New ventures attract support <p><u>Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharply focused intervention may be powerful in itself • May indirectly enhance effectiveness of other resources 	<p><u>Implementation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discrete initiatives may still be complicated • Starting something new has its own hurdles <p><u>Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be less effective at addressing needs of people facing multiple barriers than those facing a specific challenge
Improving Links	<p><u>Implementation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ready support from organizations involved • Ability to tangibly describe the problem and benefits to potential supporters <p><u>Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Particularly important for people facing multiple barriers 	<p><u>Implementation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Unlearning’ required to change existing practices <p><u>Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Particular intervention may have a marginal effect
Strategic Investment	<p><u>Implementation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promising results encourage further investment <p><u>Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective investment in research and learning can take effectiveness to a new level 	<p><u>Implementation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilizing additional investment often difficult <p><u>Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More doesn’t necessarily mean better; poorly directed investment can even undermine effectiveness
Collaborative Governance	<p><u>Implementation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support from growing number of organizations that recognize a need to work closely with others <p><u>Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can have impacts in the near term but particularly important for managing relations over the long term in order to affect outcomes 	<p><u>Implementation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substantial time and energy required, including for a convening body • Keeping partners engaged on a long-term basis <p><u>Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tracking and attributing outcomes
Social Innovation	<p><u>Implementation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovation tends to be valued and attracts support <p><u>Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibilities are great 	<p><u>Implementation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appeal of innovation may outflank know-how • Some are wary of risks associated with trying something new <p><u>Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No guarantees

pieces together in a particular manner and dislodging them so that the parts are freed up to be combined in new ways.

Social innovation of this type can be pursued in relatively broad or narrow terms. In broad terms, Vibrant Communities is about releasing the creative potential of communities. It does this by bringing together a wide array of actors to explore new ways of linking their knowledge, energy and resources. In the process, it challenges a variety of norms: a sense that poverty cannot be substantially reduced only alleviated in its effects; the tendency to focus on issues in isolation from one another, the perception that only one or another group is responsible for the existence of poverty or its elimination; and the presumption that people in poverty have little if any role to play in determining solutions.

In more focused terms, there are also various examples of innovation within the Vibrant Communities work. Vibrant Communities Calgary, Opportunities Niagara and others have all challenged current thinking about 'living wages' and offered examples of the benefits that can accrue to both employers and employees when adequate wages and benefits are paid. In addition, Opportunities Waterloo Region and the Quality of Life CHALLENGE have both promoted a wide array of human resource best practices that demonstrate the numerous ways that businesses and other employers can actively contribute to poverty reduction by adjusting their internal policies and practices.

Typically, the idea of innovation is highly valued. As a result, efforts at innovation tend to attract interest and support. However, the appeal of innovation may outflank innovation know-how. In addition, the risks of innovation may make some wary of supporting such initiatives in the first place.

By its nature, social innovation offers at least the possibility of dramatic outcomes. However, depending on the initiative, innovation may also generate smaller returns. In fact, it comes with no guarantees at all. In other words, the potential is great but the prospects are also uncertain.

Three Dimensions: Scope, Pace and Level of Action

In addition to these five challenges and their corresponding responses, comprehensive strategies may vary on at least three other dimensions:

- A. Scope
- B. Pace
- C. Level of action

Consideration of these dimensions can help expose some of the challenges associated with the various modes of comprehensiveness discussed above.

A. Scope – Broad or Narrow

As suggested above, comprehensive strategies may be broad or narrow in scope. For example, a strategy may focus on the full gamut of factors that contribute to poverty or more specifically on labour market issues, or still more narrowly on some aspect of the labour market, such as employment assistance for at-risk youth or recent immigrants. In all cases, such strategies recognize that multiple factors are involved and seek to mobilize a variety of partners to address them. However, the broader the scope of the effort, the more issues and sub-issues are likely to be at play and the greater the number of potential partners who may need to be engaged.

B. Pace – Comprehensive from the Outset or Incremental

Comprehensive initiatives may either strive to be comprehensive from the outset or take a more incremental approach to their work.

While comprehensive initiatives almost always articulate an overall plan involving multiple elements, some seek to identify and address all or almost all of the issues of concern at once. In relation to complex problems such as poverty, efforts of this kind have proven to be daunting tasks. The time and energy required to prepare comprehensive plans may result in a loss of interest on the part of those partners more inclined toward action than the dialogue and analysis involved in planning. In addition, few initiatives have the resources – human or financial – needed to tackle all aspects of a comprehensive plan at once. In the end, initiatives that seek to be comprehensive from the outset run the risk of bogging down in the planning stage, losing partners critical to putting the plan into action or being overwhelmed by the scale of the task they have defined.

Of course, initiatives can seek to be comprehensive from the outset but in relation to more narrowly defined issues. For instance, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE joined with other members of the Housing Affordability Partnership (HAP) to articulate a comprehensive approach to affordable housing in BC's Capital Region. HAP has worked to move forward each element of its plan as opportunities allowed. While still demanding, such efforts are at least more manageable than those defined in broader terms.

The alternative to being comprehensive from the outset is a more incremental approach. Here the initiative focuses its attention on a specific aspect of an issue with the intention of gradually taking on other areas of concern. Within this approach, at least two different styles are apparent. On the one hand, initiatives may deliberately target what they see as strategic drivers related to their overall concern. For example, an initiative focused on poverty reduction might see education as the critical point of intervention around which to build – 'education is the ticket out of poverty.' On the other hand, initiatives may adopt an opportunity-driven approach in which they take up specific issues of interest that emerge from the community. For example, an event such as a shooting or the release of a report on health disparities might make safety or

health issues ripe for community action. With either approach, the idea is to move gradually from the immediate area of interest to other related concerns.

C. Level of Action – Program or System

Finally, comprehensive initiatives may be focused either at the program level or at the system level.

Program level interventions pertain to specific supports and opportunities made available to individuals or families. Examples from Vibrant Communities include:

- Opportunities Waterloo Region’s Guaranteed Income Support campaign which helped low-income seniors learn about and apply for the federal government’s Guaranteed Income Supplement
- St. John’s Makin’ It Work program which uses community-based recruitment, workplace orientation and skills development, and hands-on work experience to help people obtain good-paying, permanent employment
- Opportunities Niagara’s support for the development of transitional housing.

System level interventions, on the other hand, address a variety of factors that enable or constrain efforts to provide such opportunities and supports including:

- societal trends – e.g., the growth of jobs that pay low wages and few if any benefits
- policies, laws and regulations – e.g., policies that put obstacles in the way of people interested in moving from income assistance programs to employment
- institutional practices and procedures – e.g., short-term, project-oriented, narrowly focused funding regimens
- attitudes, perceptions and values – e.g., myths about poverty and the poor [derived from Department for International Development 1999].

Again, various Vibrant Communities groups have pursued interventions at this level:

- Several communities have initiated living wage campaigns that encourage employers to pay their workers living wages and/or municipalities to include living wage provisions in their procurement policies.
- Vibrant Communities Calgary supported a collaborative policy development process to help bring about desirable changes in the province’s Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Program.
- Vibrant Communities Saint John intervened in hearings of the provincial utility company to seek changes in its policies that contribute to energy poverty.
- All communities have participated in the Vibrant Communities Funders Forum to help funding bodies consider ways of adjusting their practices to better support long-term, community-driven, comprehensive poverty reduction initiatives.

- The Quality of Life CHALLENGE’s Community Action Team has developed an experiential learning tool called the Poverty Experience to help others understand what it is like to live in poverty.

In some cases, whole initiatives may focus their attention principally on the system level. This is the thrust, for instance, of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, Vibrant Communities Calgary and the Quality of Life CHALLENGE. However, with these communities and other Vibrant Communities groups it is common to combine work at the systems and program levels – addressing some issues in programmatic terms and others at a systems level, or using program and system level interventions to inform and advance one another.

Emerging Questions

The next step in exploring the issue of comprehensiveness involves a shift in focus from concept to practice. Over the next few years, approximately 12 case studies will be undertaken with Vibrant Communities Trail Builders. Informed by the conceptual distinctions described in this paper, we will explore in more depth what comprehensive initiatives look like on the ground, the challenges they encounter and the result they achieve.

The studies will reflect a wide range of approaches taken by local communities including examples from at least three basic types of initiative: those that are framed around the challenges facing a particular *place* (e.g., a neighbourhood, city or region), a *demographic group* (e.g., youth, new Canadians or lone-parent families) or a *substantive issue* (e.g., homelessness, health or community safety).

Among other issues, the case studies will allow us to examine a number of questions emerging from the discussion in this paper:

1. Are there still other ways to enact comprehensive strategies beyond those identified here? How might such strategies be combined to enhance their respective strengths?
2. For what populations, in what ways and under what circumstances are such strategies effective?
3. What are the trade-offs that initiatives encounter with respect to the demands and risks associated with the various strategies versus the level of outcomes they may generate?
4. Are any of these approaches particularly powerful in terms of generating deep and durable outcomes?

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been a modest one: to identify conceptual distinctions that may be helpful for thinking about the role of comprehensive strategies in community-based poverty reduction. The case studies to follow will undoubtedly enrich and reformulate the ideas presented here, providing a fuller understanding of what comprehensive strategies for deep and durable outcomes look like in practice.

Endnote

1. Total number of households directly assisted by specific poverty reduction strategies to which Trail Builders had contributed as of December 2006. A given individual or household may have benefited from more than one strategy.

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