

VCSJ Framework for Change: Taking the Work to the Next Level

Introduction

Saint John, New Brunswick, has had a long history of weathering economic ups and downs. Its plans to become the energy hub of eastern Canada have helped insulate the province from the recent economic downturn experienced in other parts of the country. Large energy projects have led local employers to estimate that they will need to hire 8,000 new workers in the next few years.

Saint John also has a long tradition of helping community members in need. Numerous organizations have made strong efforts to tackle the challenges of poverty and disparity in the city. Collaborations such as the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI) and Vibrant Communities Saint John have played a particularly important role in raising the profile of poverty and keeping it on the public agenda, even with the prospect of economic good times in the immediate future.

VCSJ, for example, provided input and recommendations that helped shape the “Benefits Blueprint” in 2008 – a plan sponsored by industry and the province of New Brunswick to capture the

Vibrant Communities convener organizations prepare a ‘framework for change’ upon which they can build their poverty reduction efforts. Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) completed its first framework in 2005 and is now at the end of an initial four-year implementation phase. As VCSJ moved into the next phase of its development, its participants undertook to review whether their original ideas of how to effect poverty reduction held true or needed adjustment.

benefits of anticipated growth for *all* Saint John residents. VCSJ helped bring together partners from all sectors to craft a Greater Saint John Poverty Reduction Plan – a document which reflects the widespread commitment of community members to improve the lives of all Saint John citizens. VCSJ’s work in this regard has been cited as exemplary by the provincial government as it prepares to unveil its own poverty reduction plan later this fall.

Looking back

Vibrant Communities Saint John was founded in 2004 with support from the Human Development Council, the Urban Core Support Network and BCAPI, its convener organization. Part of VCSJ’s mandate was to weave together the numerous community and government efforts aimed at poverty reduction and community revitalization. VCSJ organizers decided early to place an emphasis on research in order to better understand the factors that contribute to poverty, determine which strategies would be most effective in reducing poverty, and investing energy and resources accordingly. At that time, poverty levels in Saint John stood at 24.5 percent, 8.3 points higher than the national average of 16.2 percent [Statistics Canada 2001].

In 2005, VCSJ joined with the Human Development Council (a local social planning council) and the University of New Brunswick Saint John’s Community University Research Alliance to produce a baseline statistical report on poverty in the city. The report was entitled *Poverty and Plenty: A Statistical Snapshot of the Quality of Life in Greater Saint John*. The report highlighted two key factors that distinguish poverty in Saint John from other urban centres in Canada. First, fully 25 percent of the City’s poor live in very high-poverty neighbourhoods in which the housing stock is generally old and in poor condition, access to government services is difficult and overall economic opportunity is limited. Second, the Saint John Census Metropolitan Area has the highest incidence of lone-parent poverty in Canada, suggesting that the face of poverty locally is overwhelmingly young and female. More than 60 percent of Saint John’s lone-parent families live on low incomes, higher than any other major Canadian city. Compounding the problem was Saint John’s high teen pregnancy rate (43 out of 1,000 births in 1999), which remains stubbornly high.

VCSJ organizers wanted to raise the level of understanding and public awareness of the traps that keep people living in poverty; once identified, action could be taken to dismantle them. “Dismantling the poverty traps” was the phrase coined to articulate VCSJ’s mission and goals. Members would add value to important work already under way in Saint John by complementing existing efforts and coordinating work across sectors. Increased support from government was felt to be crucial – both in terms of desirable policies and increased investment in poverty reduction initiatives.

With three key activities in mind – research, building public understanding of poverty and strengthening multisectoral collaboration – VCSJ was ready to focus its energies on four substantive areas: investing in children and youth, education to employment, safe and affordable housing, and neighbourhood change. Neighbourhood change was identified as a priority activity since it allowed VCSJ to attack the interlocking set of issues that lone parents and other low-income residents face, particularly those trying to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

VCSJ set high goals: to bring the poverty rate in line with the national average within ten years, to assist 800 low-income households in its first three years of operation (2005 to 2008) and to engage partners from four key sectors: government, business, community organizations and people with lived experience of poverty.

First stage results

Vibrant Communities Saint John’s three-year goals were surpassed. The 800 household target was reached and exceeded and the City’s overall poverty rate declined substantially – from 24.5 percent in the 2001 Census to 20 percent in the 2006 Census [Statistics Canada 2006; 2001]. Though overall economic improvement was the most important factor contributing to that outcome, VCSJ partners were at the forefront of numerous activities aimed at reducing poverty in the community, particularly with regard to the four substantive areas identified in its poverty reduction plan.

<i>Priority Area</i>	<i>Target (Individuals)</i>	<i>Assisted to Date (Individuals)</i>
Children and youth	500	1,450
Engagement in neighbourhood revitalization (including housing)	1,000	3,082
Young single mothers	none set	38
Education to employment	500	137
<i>Total</i>	<i>2,000</i>	<i>4,707</i>

Even in economic good times, VCSJ not only kept poverty reduction on the table, but members were also able to build momentum around that agenda. Partner targets from each of the four key sectors were surpassed. Given its success in this area, VCSJ is now focusing less on recruitment and more on helping organizations take ownership of various components of the poverty reduction strategy.

<i>Sector</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>To Date*</i>
Business	16	27
Government	40	65
Non-Profit	included in government target	67
Low-Income Residents	16	45
Other Interested Citizens		21
<i>Total</i>	72	225

* In the Business, Government and Non-Profit Sectors, ‘partners’ are organizations; in the categories Low-Income Residents and Other Interested Citizens, ‘partners’ are individuals.

Important lessons from VCSJ’s first four years of work have now been embedded into the organization’s upgraded framework for change. These include:

The value of research: Careful quantitative and qualitative research can significantly alter understanding of the issues to be addressed. The *Poverty and Plenty* research focused attention on the circumstances of high-poverty neighbourhoods in Saint John. In addition, qualitative research conducted in partnership with low-income residents deepened VCSJ partners’ appreciation of the challenges faced by neighbourhood residents and the often under-recognized strengths that enable them to persevere. Such research creates the credibility needed to push for policy and systems changes. Efforts in this area will continue to pay dividends.

Neighbourhood focus: Direct participation of neighbourhood residents with first-hand experience of poverty has put issues on the agenda that may not have otherwise been there (e.g., energy poverty), helped to engage a growing number of residents in the life of their neighbourhoods, and demonstrated

the leadership role that low-income residents can play in revitalizing their community. New strategies to support residents in building personal and community capacity are extending this work.

Weaving the pieces: From the outset, VCSJ has worked on multiple dimensions and levels of action. However, continued specific action and the provision of financial and other supports by community partners are vital for advancing neighbourhood development efforts. It has worked well to have VCSJ provide facilitation and coordination of poverty reduction efforts, and to have other partners – such as the City and CMHC – provide support. Keeping all participants grounded in the realities of low-income residents and neighbourhoods remains an important part of the work.

Engaging partners: Getting partners to the table is one thing; getting partners to think and act differently is quite another. VCSJ is learning that its role does not end once partners begin to work together. For instance, one partner might see the value in providing an information outreach role in a neighbourhood but needs to learn with others about the most effective way of encouraging residents to attend an event. VCSJ has an ongoing role to support the work of partners once they engage.

Policy change: Community partners can influence wider policies and systems when they speak with one voice, focus on the key changes they are seeking and use credible research to support their efforts. At the same time, individual communities may struggle to bring about broad-reaching policy changes at the federal and provincial levels. In the next period, VCSJ will further develop its relationships with other communities and organizations across the province in an effort to strengthen its policy change agenda.

Moving ahead

VCSJ's basic approach has been affirmed. The next period will build on its successes to date. Adjustments reflect an extension and refinement of the strategies used over the last four years as well as a continuing adjustment to the changing economic context.

At the same time, VCSJ has taken steps to reinvigorate its structure and approach in order to help take its work to a new level. First, it has re-emphasized the idea that poverty reduction is a *community* priority as opposed to one held by any one organization. The Greater Saint John Poverty Reduction Strategy is a unified plan owned by the entire community, with various elements to be led by specific partners.

Second, the initiative has hired a full-time coordinator instead of the previous arrangement in which a BCAPI employee supported both VCSJ and BCAPI. The work had grown to a point where

one half-time position was no longer sufficient. Members also felt that it was important for VCSJ to more clearly define its own identity, distinct from BCAPI.

At its founding in 2004, VCSJ created a coordinating committee – a management team made up of founding partners that offers the initiative direct operational guidance. Members include a treasurer, the Chair of VCSJ (appointed by BCAPI), a BCAPI staff person and representatives from Urban Core Support Council and Human Development Council. VCSJ’s Coordinator, Wendy MacDermott, participates in committee discussions.

The Leadership Roundtable (LRT) that oversees VCSJ has been expanded and its role refocused. In particular, representatives living on low incomes from the five neighbourhoods in which VCSJ is working are now included, as are residents from several other parts of the City. In regard to its role, the LRT has reiterated the importance of providing overall guidance to the initiative and for its members and partners to take active ownership of various aspects of the Greater Saint John Poverty Reduction Strategy. Encouraging this sense of ownership among LRT members is a key priority for 2009.

In addition, the LRT has further clarified its role. It will keep the community informed of the direction of local poverty reduction work, champion particular projects and priorities and provide

Guiding Principles of VCSJ’s Leadership Roundtable:

- Children thrive when their families are healthy, and individuals and families do well when they live in supportive communities
- Collaboration and coordination across all sectors build the capacity of our community to reduce poverty
- Innovative ways of working together bring changes to individuals, communities and systems
- Policy, plans and programs are based on individual and community strengths, and sound research and evaluation
- Revitalization of a neighbourhood engages a whole community
- Resident-led neighbourhood development contributes to responsive and sustainable actions
- All our work contributes to poverty reduction.

continuous feedback among residents, the needs they express and the various VCSJ groups – citizens, organizations and businesses.

Overall, VCSJ members are extremely pleased that its newly articulated poverty reduction strategy now belongs to Saint John as a whole. Various partners will play important roles: HDC will provide research services, BCAPI will lead work related to children and youth and VCSJ will support neighbourhood revitalization, workforce participation and policy change efforts – at the municipal, provincial and Maritime levels. Other partners will take turns leading other facets of the work, as appropriate. Vibrant Communities Saint John remains the partner that keeps attention on the issues, but reaffirms its commitment to serve as convener and facilitator, not service provider.

Finally, the revamped Leadership Roundtable has articulated seven guiding principles to direct its work. They return to the initiative’s core desire to dismantle the traps that keep people mired in poverty – with the added wisdom that poverty reduction requires concerted effort, investment and intervention over two or three generations.

Updated goals and targets

VCSJ continues to stand by its early definition of poverty as the social and economic vulnerability caused to individuals and households by a lack of resources needed for dignity, self-sufficiency and well-being [Vibrant Communities Saint John 2005]. Members have reconfirmed and adjusted their aspirational goals - to achieve changes at this level. as they did in the first period of their work, they’ve specified some more immediate targets for the areas they’re working in.

The initiative’s overall targets have been renewed, though slightly revised:

- Bringing the poverty rate in Saint John in line with the 2006 national average by 2015.
- VCSJ has set a goal of reducing the child poverty rate from 32 to 9 percent by 2025.
- VCSJ would like to ensure that a provincial poverty reduction strategy is in place by the end of 2009. VCSJ partners have already contributed to the province’s decision to initiate a year-long, province-wide engagement process that is intended to generate such a strategy, and are actively involved in providing input to that process.

As depicted in the diagram on the following page, the upgraded plan identifies both *what* is to be done and *how*.

GREATER SAINT JOHN'S POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

NEW WAYS OF WORKING TOGETHER TO BREAK THE POVERTY CYCLE

Strategy Elements

Neighbourhood Revitalization

- * Resident mobilization and training
- * Housing Strategy
- * Social, physical, and economic improvements
- * Mixed Income Neighbourhoods

Single Parents

- Comprehensive programs and supports:
- * Adequate and Affordable Housing Strategy
 - * Childcare
 - * School completion
 - * Parenting
 - * Health and Wellness

Children and Youth

- Level the playing field:
- * Early Learning Centres
 - * School Supports / Community Schools
 - * Youth Programs / Engagement / Leadership
 - * Coordination of Services

Workforce Participation

- * Multiple Pathways and supports
- * Remove barriers: childcare, transportation, health insurance, tuition
- * Employer Leadership
- * Living wage replaces minimum wage

How we do it!



The elements that will drive the poverty reduction process reflect those used by VCSJ since its inception: strong local leadership, multisectoral partnerships, research and evaluation, and policy improvements. The four substantive areas of work are modified slightly from VCSJ's original framework for change. For example, housing and energy poverty have been more clearly identified as aspects of neighbourhood change. All elements of the plan are to be grounded in work at the neighbourhood level.

Conclusion

Since 2004, Vibrant Communities Saint John has continued to strengthen the planks of its framework for change: research, building public understanding of poverty and strengthening multisectoral collaboration. The City's built structure – with a high concentration of poverty in older neighbourhoods – created an opportunity for focusing partner interest, energies and strategies in high-needs neighbourhoods. Lessons learned in these parts of Saint John can be adapted to other poverty clusters in the rest of the City and throughout New Brunswick, as VCSJ and its partners help to build a province where poverty traps are named, sprung and broken.

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Statistics Canada. (2001.) *Census*.

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