

## **Comprehensive Community Initiatives: Promising Directions for “Wicked” Problems?**

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Poverty, health inequalities, and concentrated social disadvantage and exclusion are persistent problems in Canada and other rich countries. These problems are complex, with underlying social and economic forces that are deep-seated, interdependent, and constantly shifting.

They are classic “wicked” policy problems because:

- they cannot be “solved” with a program here or an investment there, but require interventions by multiple actors – including, but not limited to, public policies – over the long term;
- there is little agreement within policy circles on the most effective solutions, and limited evidence or predictability about the impact of interventions; and
- the longer-term impact and implications of any policy response are uncertain and dynamic.

But we policy analysts can’t just throw up our hands and say it all is too complex to deal with. We need models of policy thinking, strategic investment, and service interventions that can address complex problems related to health inequalities, neighbourhood revitalization, and poverty.

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) have been developed across Canada and in many other jurisdictions to address exactly these kinds of issues. CCIs bring together a wide range of service providers, people with lived experience, community leaders, and other stakeholders to build broad collaborations to address the roots of local problems in their specific communities. These initiatives have tremendous promise as one part of the policy and program repertoire needed to address contemporary social problems and policy challenges. This article explores how successful CCIs have been to date. What is their potential for making progress on deep-seated problems like poverty and health disparities? What policy and other enablers are needed to realize this potential?

In May 2010, Tamarack - An Institute for Community Engagement and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation jointly sponsored a Strategic Dialogue to consider these kinds of questions, in relation to their Vibrant Communities and other comprehensive collaborative community initiatives directed towards poverty reduction. This article is based upon background research commissioned for this conference.<sup>1</sup>

## **Complex Social Problems**

Complexity may be in danger of becoming an over-used word, invoked when policy and social problems appear a bit too challenging. So we always need to specify. Poverty is a complex problem because:

- it is shaped by multiple intersecting and cumulative drivers - from global economic trends to local pay levels, from shifting labour markets to social exclusion;
- the roots of poverty – and the profile of people and communities most likely to be poor – is much affected by wider structural trends in the labour force, economy, and society;
- these trends, and the resulting shape and scale of poverty, are constantly changing;
- efforts to address the impact of poverty and to reduce its level and severity involve many stakeholders from a range of community, government, and other sectors;
- the public policy environment for poverty reduction is also incredibly dynamic - not just in terms of a constantly changing array of programs and strategic directions, but all of them working across jurisdictional boundaries, with varying degrees of autonomous action, co-ordination, and competition.

Comprehensive community initiatives arose out of frustration with the limited impact of individual and isolated programs working away at the symptoms of poverty, and out of a realization that the complexity of poverty required comprehensive solutions. It was also increasingly recognized that these complex social dynamics play out in particular places; that efforts need to be planned and located at a local city or neighbourhood level; and that they need to bring together the widest range of service providers, stakeholders, and community members in collective efforts. Similarly, policies addressing health inequalities (and their interaction with poverty in many countries combine broad national policy targets with local priority-setting and implementation (Blackman, 2006). For example, Britain's Health Action Zones concentrated local investment and programming in disadvantaged areas, not just to enhance access to healthcare but to support employment, education, and other community capacity-building efforts.<sup>2</sup>

## Interaction of Health and Social Problems

Just as the roots and dynamics of social problems are complex, so, too, can the impact of poverty and other problems be felt across many spheres. For example, there is a consistent gradient in which health gets worse the lower down the social scale, whether measured by income or other factors. The difference between the life expectancy of the top and bottom income deciles in Canada is 7.4 years for men and 4.5 for women. Taking account of the pronounced gradient in morbidity and quality of life, health-adjusted life expectancy reveals even higher disparities between the top and bottom groups of 11.4 years for men and 9.7 for women (McIntosh et al, 2009).

A huge body of research demonstrates that health and health inequalities are shaped by income distribution, access to education, availability of affordable adequate housing, childcare and early child development, various forms of social exclusion, environmental factors, and other social determinants of health.\*

These determinants of health interact and intersect with each other, producing mutually reinforcing and cumulative impacts over people's lives and on the health of particular populations or communities. This complex activity occurs in a constantly changing and dynamic system – in fact, through multiple interacting and interdependent economic, social, and health systems that play out in particular neighbourhoods and regions.\*\*

\*These determinants of health have been the focus of sustained high-level policy attention in recent years: from the World Health Organization's Special Commission on Determinants of Health, through European Union and other broad efforts, to comprehensive policies to address the determinants and their impact on health inequalities in many countries. For an excellent survey of the research and policy literature, see Hilary Graham. 2007. *Unequal Lives: Health and Socioeconomic Inequalities*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press.

\*\*For a comprehensive discussion of complexity, population health, and imagining and building community and policy alternatives, see Bobby Milstein. 2008. *Hygeia's Constellation: Navigating Health Futures in a Dynamic and Democratic World*. Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Syndemics Prevention Network.

## A Promising Approach

Although Canadian experience of CCIs has been mainly in the area of poverty reduction – the dozen Vibrant Community initiatives across the country are the most studied and systematic (and most studied) examples – but there have been many other local initiatives defined and planned as CCIs. These include projects within the Community Economic Development Network; Social Planning Councils and comparable community organizations; United Way and Community Foundation social justice efforts; and many other projects in particular communities, such as broad collaborations to end homelessness in Calgary, community planning in Ottawa and elsewhere.

We know that throwing money at the symptoms of poverty in isolation, or traditional siloed and short-term anti-poverty efforts have had little effect. CCIs offer the promise of:

- building strong local partnerships to attack poverty across many fronts, from schools, through support for immigrant settlement support, to skills building and community development;
- supporting integrated and co-ordinated programs, and service delivery;
- planning that is driven by community interests and perspectives; and
- highlighting individual and community capacity-building as a central priority of local efforts.

### **Impact of CCIs in Canada**

A key goal of the Strategic Dialogue jointly sponsored by Tamarack and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation was to bring together experts and thought leaders to assess the impact of CCIs. Sophisticated evaluation is needed for complex problems. If we're asking if CCIs have been effective, we need to specify: effective at what and to what purposes? This means differentiating levels of impact: from the individual (e.g., the building-up skills or ability to deal with the harshest damages of poverty), to the local community (building resilience and capacities), to system-wide (addressing the foundations of poverty and changing underlying policies).

And we need to build complexity into our analysis: the results of particular programs or interventions are interdependent and hard to separate; fundamental change takes time; and we need to always expect and look for unintended consequences. One clear conclusion from the research literature and practice experience is that it is crucial to build in evaluation from the outset.

In Wellesley's research, we separated out key areas where CCIs were having (or could be expected to have an impact) (Gardner et al., 2010). CCIs tended to be successful at moving poverty up the public and policy agenda, in their local areas and beyond. There have been many high-profile fora, roundtables, and campaigns in communities across the country, involving credible leaders and organizations.

The various initiatives have also been successful at building broad collaborations. But a central question addressed in the Strategic Dialogue is whether this is important in and of itself. A key conclusion is that collaborations are one vital strategy among many to build comprehensive integrated local action on poverty, but their purposes and focus need to be carefully analyzed.

One such purpose is supporting community capacities, resilience, and social capital – either in the sense of enhancing communities' abilities to deal with the adverse effects of poverty and inequality, or in the stronger sense of empowering communities to mobilize to change their adverse circumstances and constrained opportunities. There are some indications of impact in terms of new local endeavours being created, community groups enhancing their

resources and capacities, and deeper inter-connectedness developing within communities. But one question is whether these kinds of results are durable and can be sustained over the long term, and what effect they have on reducing poverty.

If success is about providing responsive and effective services to the most disadvantaged individuals and communities, CCI-type community-based, collaborative, and integrated programming works. Many specific kinds of integrated delivery such as comprehensive early child development, intensive case management and support for children with behavioural or developmental problems, and customized and individual-centred wrap-around forms of service provision have shown significant impact.

A fundamental goal of CCIs is getting individuals out of poverty. Vibrant Communities and other initiatives are geared to enhancing individual assets – the individual strengths of people facing poverty - as its bottom line. The assumption is that enhancing individual and household assets will support people to reduce their risk of poverty. They track the people who are able to enhance their skills, employability, income, or other assets as a result of their efforts. The more successful Vibrant Communities initiatives - for example, programs sponsored by the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction – have had considerable impact in this regard: while poverty levels remained the same across Ontario, the number under the low-income line in Hamilton fell by 1.9% after they were implemented (Gardner et al., 2010).<sup>3</sup>

However, some analysts and practitioners argue that even the best of this type of programming does not help that many people, reduce overall numbers in poverty, or address the underlying structural drivers of poverty and inequality. Comprehensive international reviews, such as the King's Fund (Coote et al., 2004) and the Aspen Institute (Kubisch et al., 2010), have concluded that population level impacts have been limited.

If the goal is reducing poverty overall, then there is little evidence of success so far. But this may not be a realistic expectation – what Aspen terms a “theory failure,” as opposed to planning or implementation problems. Even the most effective and cross-sectoral of CCIs cannot reduce poverty unless the fundamental underpinnings of social and economic inequality are addressed. Even the most effective community building and program changes will take years to show an effect.

As a result, many practitioners have concluded that they need to work towards changes at the system or policy level, as well as on individual and community impacts. So if success is seen in terms of the more immediate – and arguably more realistic – goal of mobilizing for and winning policy changes to address the structural and systemic foundations of poverty and inequality, then impact has still been somewhat mixed, but is more promising. For example, many Vibrant Communities projects do target policy changes (and resource decisions) at the local level, and there have been many examples of local investments and policy changes shaped by the projects. It certainly can be argued that the mobilization efforts

and visibility of comprehensive community initiatives contributed to the development of provincial poverty reduction strategies.

## **Potential of CCIs**

From a community sector point of view, CCIs build on strengths and areas where community efforts have leverage and unique advantages. Governments often rely on the community sector – acting as their agent – to deliver services that frequently involve a narrow range of specific interventions. However, CCIs show that there are other possible ways of delivering services and addressing the impact of poverty. They can bring together many organizations, communities, and projects to reinforce their service impact.

While the community sector can't change policy directly, CCIs can contribute to building awareness and broad coalitions to press for change. By showing that other directions for poverty reduction can be imagined – and achieved – CCIs can build public and policy support.

From a policy point of view, CCIs offer a way to bridge the gap from local to system-wide: they can dig deep to address the local roots of poverty, while building broad local collaborations and integrated efforts, and highlighting the wider systemic and policy changes needed to address the roots of poverty. Especially given the ineffectiveness of most program and policy responses to date in shifting poverty and other deep-seated problems, CCIs can be a critical addition to the policy toolkit to address complex social problems.

More broadly, figuring out how to address such “wicked” problems as persistent poverty, social exclusion, and health inequalities has led to a wider recognition of the need for comprehensive and co-ordinated cross-sectoral strategies, and more horizontal, or “cross-departmental”, processes within government.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, it is understood that complex problems are played out in particular places and there has been emerging emphasis across a number of different governments and countries on neighbourhood, or locally focused, social policy interventions (Blackman, 2006):

- Many government, community, and cross-sectoral initiatives across Canada address neighbourhood renewal, the roots of violence in particular communities, concentrating services in high-needs/risk neighbourhoods;
- At the “federal meets local” levels, there have been local co-ordinating committees of immigrant settlement services, and this can also be a space to highlight wider issues of precarious labour markets, social exclusion, housing, and health, etc.;
- At the provincial level, the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion is adopting a new “healthy communities” strategy, and British Columbia’s Act Now strategy emphasizes community development and collaborative approaches.

These emerging trends make it easier to grasp and “sell” the potential of CCIs within government: they offer quite a unique opportunity to concretely demonstrate how to effectively address “wicked” problems on the ground.<sup>5</sup>

## **Realizing the Policy and Social Potential of Comprehensive Community Initiatives**

If CCIs offer promise for policy and practice, how can this potential be realized? This concluding section first of all outlines broad success conditions and then analyzes the ways in which government policy can enable this success.

### **Within Comprehensive Community Initiatives**

Our research indicated a number of crucial pre-conditions for successful comprehensive community initiatives:

- developing an inspiring vision and coherent strategy on how to reduce poverty (or address other pressing issues);
- building from solid foundations of local research, experience, and community strengths;
- being solidly based – and solidly connected – to the needs and perspectives of local people and communities;
- aligning the wide range of activities and partnerships these initiatives engage into the core vision and strategy;
- learning how to manage complexity and work across multiple sectors and activities;
- developing effective ways to build evaluation and learning back into the initiative, and adapt to changing conditions/opportunities;
- defining and pushing for public policy that will enable the initiatives to thrive and sustain themselves; and
- delivering local impact while addressing the wider roots of poverty and inequality (Gardner et al., 2010).

### **Governments as Enablers**

There has been much discussion about new forms of governance, with government departments and ministries seen as stewards or enablers, rather than as designers, implementers, and deliverers. Just as CCIs can be a unique way of demonstrating how to address complex “wicked” problems concretely, so, too, can they help to flesh out what stewardship actually means in practice.

There has been a great deal of thinking within government and the community sector about the need to restructure public funding regimes to more effectively enable community organizations to fulfill their mandates. In terms of CCIs specifically, this means explicitly funding collaboration efforts and infrastructure, not just the delivery of “X” discrete, narrowly-defined services to “Y” people. This cannot mean simply adding collaboration and partnerships as one more requirement for funding applications; rather, it means explicitly recognizing that building collaborations takes significant resources. Longer-term funding and impact horizons are needed because comprehensive collaboration cannot be sustained with a never-ending series of short-term project grants, and their impacts will take years to show up.

Our research concluded that CCIs need to build evaluation into a continuous learning and innovation cycle. Governments need to fund evaluation and not expect community organizations to somehow pay for evaluation out of their overall budgets. Funders must also change their expectations regarding evaluation. They must support evaluation as an enabler of innovation, continuous service improvement, and organizational learning – not simply as a means to meet narrow accountability requirements.

But this needs to extend beyond individual community organizations or initiatives. Fora and infrastructure are needed to share experience and lessons learned, assess promising practices, and scale up effective interventions where appropriate. While learning and innovation may be local, this knowledge management infrastructure needs to be systematic and broad, and it is one more critical enabler that governments need to ensure.

## **Conclusion**

There is no magic blueprint for successful community action. It's never a question of do this or do that, but it involves making the best judgment based on experience and circumstances. None of these challenges need to be all or nothing. The goal doesn't need to be CCIs in every community, but it could be trying to make all anti-poverty efforts as co-ordinated and comprehensive as possible.

Let's go back to our vision. If the ultimate goal of social policy is a fairer and more equitable society where lives are not stunted by poverty and exclusion, then comprehensive community initiatives – be they around poverty, immigrant support, building resilience and social capital, or health equity - are part of the innovation and mobilization that are needed to get there. They can be a unique and valuable component of the policy repertoire needed to address “wicked” problems.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Strategic Dialogue, see [http://tamarackcommunity.ca/Strategic\\_Dialogue.html](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/Strategic_Dialogue.html)

<sup>2</sup> Reflecting a common but less welcome feature of public policy, this initiative was reconfigured, arguably before its full impact could be demonstrated.

<sup>3</sup> Gardner et al., p 24. The indicators developed by Vibrant Communities were based upon extensive international research and experience.

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting analysis of how recent British “New Labour” governments identified and addressed “wicked” problems and how this operated in health inequalities, see Steve Cropper and Mark Goodwin, “ ‘Policy Experiments’: Policy Making, Implementation, and Learning” (Ch. 2), in Steve Cropper et al. (eds.) 2007. *Community Health and Wellbeing: Action Research on Health Inequalities*. Bristol: Policy Press. There is a lot of policy literature on how – and how successfully – health inequalities have been addressed. The dynamics and impacts from various British governments’ extensive policy and program responses have been examined by Elizabeth Dowler and Nick Spencer. (eds.) 2007. *Challenging Health Inequalities: From Acheson to ‘Choosing Health.’* Bristol: Policy Press.

<sup>5</sup> There is also increasing recognition of the importance of policy networks of experts, stakeholders, researchers, and community and other service providers as inputs or allies within state policy formation; c.f. John Hudson & Stuart Lowe. 2009. *Understanding the Policy Process: Analyzing Welfare Policy and Practice*. Bristol: Policy Press. Ch. 8. The well organized strategic review organized by the Tamarack Institute and partners, and the ongoing community of practice that has emerged around CCIs addressing poverty reductions, are examples of how such networks can be a critical resource for the elaboration of policy on complex social issues.

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