Asset-based, Resident-led Neighbourhood Development

Eric Leviten-Reid

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Introduction

Action for Neighbourhood Change is a learning initiative exploring ways to support resident-led strategies for strengthening neighbourhoods.

More specifically, it aims to understand two key aspects of the neighbourhood revitalization process:

1. Building the capacity of individuals, families and neighbourhoods
2. Enhancing the responsiveness of government to neighbourhood concerns.

Working in five sites across the country, ANC brings together a wide array of national and local partners. Five federal government partners are sponsoring the initiative: the National Secretariat on Homelessness (Human Resources and Social Development), Office for Learning Technologies (Human Resources and Social Development), National Literacy Secretariat (Human Resources and Social Development), Canada's Drug Strategy (Health Canada) and National Crime Prevention Strategy (Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada). Four national partners are convening the initiative and facilitating aspects of the work: the United Way of Canada - Centraide Canada, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the National Film Board of Canada and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Finally, United Ways in five cities – Halifax, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Regina and Surrey – are playing a bridging and facilitation role on the local level. In one neighbourhood in each city, the local United Way has brought together residents, organizations, businesses and government agencies in support of neighbourhood development.

A great deal has been accomplished in the short period of ANC's operation to date. Over the course of 14 months, the initiative established the infrastructure needed to support its work, followed a complete cycle in the revitalization process (from neighbourhood selection through resident engagement, vision building and initial actions) and explored the implications for the policies and procedures of government, as well as for other structures wishing to support neighbourhood initiatives.

Insights and experiences pertaining to neighbourhood revitalization have been documented throughout the process in an extensive set of papers, stories, tools and reports. This emerging body of knowledge constitutes one of the important 'legacies' from ANC's first phase. It lays a foundation for the initiative's continuing work and provides a substantial source of information and ideas for others interested in strengthening neighbourhoods. Already, the lessons from ANC have been shared with a wide audience through the ANC website (*www.anccommunity.ca*) and electronic newsletter, and through presentations at conferences and other forums.

The aim of this final reflection paper is not to review all of the important issues and insights that have been documented elsewhere but to synthesize the findings and highlight key lessons learned to date, and their implications for ongoing efforts at neighbourhood revitalization.

Collaborative action learning

One of the basic challenges for any collaboration is to forge a shared understanding among all partners about the nature of the work at hand. This is particularly the case for initiatives that bring together a broad range of participants to tackle complex issues such as neighbourhood revitalization.

In the case of ANC, partners entered the process with a base of common ideas about the challenge to be addressed and approach to be pursued. They recognized the growing concentration of poverty in urban neighbourhoods across the country. They noted the multiple risk factors for poverty that tend to be found in these neighbourhoods: lack of good quality, affordable housing, low education levels, high unemployment, poor health and high incidence of crime. And they identified the need for broad-based collaboration in order to coordinate, and where possible integrate, responses to these various problems.

Despite this solid beginning, considerable time was required for partners to build relationships with one another, share their respective understanding of the work and create together a more complete and integrated set of ideas for guiding the initiative. Moreover, much of this phase of ANC's work involved engaging with a final critical partner – local residents – and incorporating their perspectives into the initiative.

In this respect, ANC is a good example of collaborative action learning. Cycles of research, dialogue, action and reflection have been used to elaborate and refine a shared understanding of neighbourhood revitalization.

Time has been a critical ingredient allowing the process to unfold and the groundwork of relationships and understanding to be built.

Toward a Canadian model of neighbourhood revitalization

ANC can be understood as part of a new generation of community work sometimes referred to as comprehensive community initiatives. Since the 1990s, such initiatives have evolved in the US, the UK and other countries as ways to tackle complex social issues. Increasingly, this approach is being explored in Canada as well, for instance through Vibrant Communities, a pan-Canadian initiative pursuing comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction, and a growing number of other government or community sponsored initiatives.

Comprehensive community initiatives tend to share a number of basic features. Typically, they:

- pursue broad, multiple goals
- promote multisectoral collaboration
- combine an array of strategies to enhance each other's effectiveness

- seek changes in a number of spheres (e.g., employment, housing) and levels of action (e.g., individual, organization, community, wider systems)
- pursue some combination of community empowerment, ownership, participation, leadership and community capacity-building
- are intentionally flexible, developmental and responsive to changing local conditions
- recognize the long-term nature of fundamental community change and employ relatively long-term time frames [Brown 1995: 2].

As detailed more fully in *Orienteering Over New Ground: A Neighbourhood Theory of Change,* the theory of change recently articulated by ANC partners, identifies the thinking behind many of these key ideas. Within this overall framework, ANC has begun to chart an approach to neighbourhood revitalization distinguished by its emphasis on the central role played by neighbourhood residents.

In fact, a primary purpose of ANC's first phase was to build a strong foundation for its work by engaging residents as key participants in leading and producing change in their neighbourhoods. In the process, important lessons were learned about the nature of neighbourhood revitalization and the implications for institutions and organizations wishing to support such efforts.

What is emerging is an asset-based, resident-led model of neighbourhood development.

Asset-based, resident-led neighbourhood development

While the involvement of neighbourhood residents was always a key component of ANC's design, the full significance of this aspect of its work has only become apparent as the initiative has unfolded. Ultimately, the focus on resident participation has encouraged a particular way of thinking about neighbourhood revitalization itself.

To paraphrase Jane Jacobs, neighbourhood development is a do-it-yourself process. If you don't do it yourself, development doesn't happen [Jacobs 1984: 140]. Like exercise, it is a hands-on affair. While others may benefit indirectly, it is the people who are actively involved who experience the learning and change that is the essence of 'development.'

'Do-it-yourself,' however, does not mean 'do-it-alone.' Rather, it means being at the table with everyone else involved. As Jacobs observed of great cities, a key ingredient of strong neighbourhoods is the web of relations through which people combine their talents to achieve goals no one individual or group could do acting on their own.

Moreover, like great cities, healthy neighbourhoods are those that are able to sustain their development over time. They do this by building a stockpile of assets they can use to generate income, weather hard times and innovate in response to changing circumstances. More than just financial or physical, such assets are cultural (ways of thinking and acting) and social (connections with others) as well. By developing a critical mass of assets in these different areas, neighbourhoods are able to meet their needs and aspirations on an ongoing basis.

In this light, resident participation is integral to both the process and outcome of neighbour-hood revitalization. Such involvement is the very basis through which the neighbourhood itself builds the array of personal and community assets needed to ensure its long-term vitality.

An asset-based, resident-led perspective on neighbourhood development also provides an important rationale for interdepartmental and intergovernmental support for neighbourhoods. It is, in effect, a prevention strategy through which various government agencies can collaborate in addressing "risk factors where they are joined, upstream" rather than contending separately with a series of even more difficult challenges "at the tributaries downstream" [Bulthuis 2005: 3].

Neighbourhood voice and the re-emergence of community development

Given the importance of resident involvement, it is not surprising that community development skills and expertise have emerged as the core of ANC's approach to strengthening neighbourhoods. In many respects, this process reflects longstanding community development principles and practices. At the same time, it has involved the adaptation and refinement of these approaches to suit the broad-reaching collaborations typical of comprehensive community initiatives.

A variety of specific insights emerged through ANC's work about various dimensions and stages of the neighbourhood development process:

the significance of 'place'

In part, the growing attention to 'place-based development' and 'place-based public policy' reflects a growing appreciation of the unique significance of local settings: localities are where diverse factors come together to generate either positive or negative effects. In the case of economic and social innovation, for instance, it has been recognized that local settings are the sites where elements are combined in new ways to generate desirable changes [Industry Canada 2002: 72]. On the other hand, as with the concentration of poverty in urban neighbourhoods, local sites can also be the place where multiple factors interact in ways that foster complex problems.

'Place,' then, is more than a matter of geography; it involves a conceptual shift as well, a re-focusing of attention from the parts to the relationships among them. Underlying ANC's work has been a focus on how diverse groups and processes at play in neighbourhoods relate to one another, and how they can be linked most effectively to achieve the goals of local residents.

defining neighbourhood

While neighbourhoods are easily understood as examples of local settings, ANC participants discovered that what constitutes a 'neighbourhood' is a more complex question than it first appears. In practice, neighbourhoods rarely fall neatly into formal political boundaries or official catchment areas. While having a geographic dimension, they also are defined by the lived experience of residents: Do people of a given area consider themselves to be members of the same neighbourhood? Do they share interests and concerns that would encourage them to collaborate in a local development initiative? All sites were sensitive to such considerations. One proposed operationalizing its understanding by focusing on shared physical experiences – i.e., shopping or school attendance as the basis for determining neighbourhood boundaries.

In the end, what may be more important than any formal definition of neighbourhood is attention to what practically will facilitate a productive revitalization process in the actual setting under consideration. In any particular context, what would constitute the setting where people can be brought together to address shared concerns and interests?

importance and limitations of data

All of ANC's local sites made use of data to support their neighbourhood selection processes. However, data alone was inadequate for identifying which neighbourhoods were most appropriate for inclusion in the initiative. In general, data was found to be more useful for determining which neighbourhoods ought not to be selected, for instance, because the challenges they faced turned out to be less extensive than perceived.

The choice of neighbourhoods to participate in ANC depended more on an appreciation of the dynamics of the neighbourhoods and especially the extent to which local organizations and residents were attracted to the opportunity presented by ANC, and poised to tackle existing challenges. This assessment was made on the basis of discussions with individuals and groups active in the neighbourhoods. Informal as well as formal connections between local United Ways and the neighbourhoods involved were important starting points for exploring the potential of partnerships.

discerning readiness

In selecting neighbourhoods in which to work, all sites placed considerable emphasis on determining a threshold of 'readiness' for pursuing an intentional process of revitalization. In part, the focus on readiness was a response to ANC's short time frame. Sites felt a need to identify neighbourhoods with sufficient strengths that substantial progress could be made in relatively short order. At the same time, attention to readiness was an acknowledgment that certain conditions needed to be present in order for a process of revitalization to occur at all. All sites looked for a co-existence of distress factors and core assets on which to build. One site framed its task as identifying a neighbourhood that possessed just short of the critical mass of strengths needed to ensure its own well being. Another focused explicitly on the neighbourhood's preparedness to embrace the open-ended nature of the project and particularly the opportunity to direct its own revitalization efforts.

In other words, all sites recognized that revitalization is ultimately a process of development from within. While external supports are necessary, they can only be productive if there is a basic capacity within the neighbourhood to engage and use them. In neighbourhoods where that threshold has not been met, a longer start-up period that concentrates more on what might be seen as 'pre-development' activities may be in order.

managing perceptions and expectations

In launching their initiatives locally, all sites encountered challenges managing perceptions and expectations. These included concerns about stigmatization of local neighbourhoods as well as excessive expectations of what the ANC initiative might accomplish and how quickly. In the early stages of the initiative, careful attention to language was required to ensure effective communication – both the substance of the messages and the directness with which they were conveyed.

Concerns about stigmatization were expressed not only by neighbourhood residents but by municipal governments in some sites as well. In several cases, sites found that one key factor related to stigmatization was local media. Strategies for fostering productive relations with the media were needed. While the media can play a valuable role in telling the story of what is happening in the neighbourhood, care is needed to ensure the way that the story is told, in fact, supports the development effort rather than undermines it. The media often need to be awakened to the strengths of neighbourhoods and the positive measures being pursued rather than their deficits.

In terms of managing expectations, ANC project managers were concerned about raising the hopes of residents beyond what could possibly be attained, particularly in relation to programmatic outcomes such as jobs and housing. Key messages for conveying the nature of the development process included: the long-term nature of the work, the leadership role that local residents would play and the need to strengthen relations with government and community agencies that could support the

neighbourhood process. The same messages were communicated to all partners and prospective partners, including government sponsors, to ensure that all shared appropriate expectations.

a process of discovery

The neighbourhood revitalization process was experienced fundamentally as a process of discovery. Good community facilitators do not presume to know what people need but consistently strive to understand the concerns and desires of residents. Through dialogue and observation they seek to uncover what works and what does not. In the words of one ANC project manager, the development process is constantly in 'beta testing' mode, always trying things out and continually adjusting in response to changes in the community and a growing appreciation of the needs and desires of residents. Frequently, what works is something that was never designed in advance but emerges through the process of engagement itself.

stages of the development process

During this period, ANC traced the development process from neighbourhood selection through engagement and mobilization, vision building and initial actions. While the experiences of sites with each phase has been described in more detail in ANC's quarterly reports, two broad points should be highlighted here.

First, there was considerable variation in the ways the five sites moved through these diverse phases. In particular, sites emphasized at different times the development of structures for supporting resident engagement, the building of visions and the identification of possible actions. Sites also used unique methods to undertake the work of these various phases. Some used large scale meetings as part of the process for building a neighbourhood vision while others employed a series of smaller meetings to draw out residents' thinking about the future being sought for their neighbourhood.

Second, there was a substantial degree of overlap and interaction among the various stages of development. For example, even in the process of engaging residents, vision building was already taking place as residents began thinking about what might be achieved for their neighbourhood. Similarly, in some sites, initiating action was itself important as a means of engaging and mobilizing residents.

In short, the development process throughout this period proved to be both highly fluid and variable. Vital to the success of these initiatives is the flexibility they allow for local organizers to support appropriate processes. Skilled and experienced community facilitators are therefore critical to enabling such initiatives to succeed.

tailoring to local realities

Variation from site to site was apparent throughout all aspects of the initiative and is an important general feature of efforts to strengthen neighbourhoods. ANC's five local initiatives operated in substantially different contexts. In addition, each United Way and its ANC team brought a distinct perspective to the work. Consequently, each local initiative evolved in its own pattern.

ANC's experience in this regard confirms that of other community building efforts. Customization is essential to effective neighbourhood development processes. While local initiatives often need resources from external sources, such as government, they also need the flexibility to pursue processes that suit local circumstances and reflect the insights of local leaders.

Variations in approach are apparent in the early organizing efforts of the sites:

- *Halifax:* From early on, Halifax emphasized a 'go slow' community engagement approach to its work. It used a number of measures to build its relationship with the Spryfield neighbourhood. It held many small meetings with community members, formed a close partnership with a local community centre that was already coordinating efforts in the neighbourhood and hired neighbourhood residents to work on the project. It also emphasized to neighbourhood participants from the outset that ANC was very open-ended and depended largely on direction provided by the neighbourhood itself. This overall approach helped to build trust between the Halifax team and its neighbourhood partners. It also fostered substantial ownership of the initiative on the part of neighbourhood participants.

- *Surrey:* Surrey aimed from the outset to build strong involvement from its regional system of support. It engaged a wide array of government and community agencies to join in the neighbourhood selection process. The process created a high level of engagement in the initiative, allowed for valuable learning about Surrey neighbourhoods in general and primed participants to provide appropriate support to the Bridgeview neighbourhood. The Surrey team cautioned participants to wait for neighbourhood residents to determine the types of supports desired before pursuing new initiatives in the neighbourhood.

- *Toronto:* Building on the work of the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force, Toronto determined early on to work in one of the inner suburbs that represent the new face of poverty in the city. Unlike traditional inner city neighbourhoods, such suburbs are marked by a distinct lack of social infrastructure. A highly multicultural environment, including many new Canadians, contributes further to the relatively fragmented social setting. In this context, additional time and effort are required to build relations among neighbourhood residents. The United Way also determined that it was necessary to establish its own local office in the neighbourhood to help strengthen its presence and provide an organizational base for the work of the project.

- *Regina:* Regina's starting point was not so much the neighbourhood with which to work but how to merge effectively with an existing neighbourhood initiative. The federal government had earlier established the Regina Inner City Community Partnership (RICCP) and there was a strong expectation from at least some parts of the federal government that the ANC initiative in Regina contribute to this effort. The local ANC team sought to serve as a bridge between the RICCP and the residents of North Central community. It used a recent evaluation process to identify ways in which the ongoing process could be strengthened, particularly to more fully reflect the perspective of neighbourhood members. A key challenge for the United Way of Regina was to maintain its own approach to community building while joining in a pre-existing initiative.

- *Thunder Bay:* Thunder Bay followed an organic process responsive to its evolving under-standing of the Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood and the most effective means of engaging residents. To the extent possible, residents were involved in the learning process along with local organizers. Residents participated, for instance, in a workshop on asset building for neighbourhood revitalization. One challenge has been to maintain the involvement of such participants while continuing to reach out to others in the neighbourhood. Advancing this basic organizing work while also moving toward concrete action proved to be a critical balancing act.

commonalities

Notwithstanding the importance of customizing initiatives to local circumstances and the considerable variation in experiences, a significant list of shared lessons has also emerged from the work of local sites:

- *Go slow and let the community lead:* Despite the short time frame of ANC's first phase, sites agreed that it was vital to invest substantial time and effort in the engagement process. Building relationships with and among residents was considered to be the foundation for revitalization efforts. As suggested by the adage, "Alone we go fast, together we go far," benefits from this investment will be felt long beyond the start-up phase. Moreover, by being transparent about the open-ended nature of the initiative and its reliance on direction from the neighbourhood itself, residents were given the space to gradually take ownership of the process. In order to allow such ownership to develop, it was important that ANC project teams be willing not to rush ahead but wait for residents themselves to push forward the process.

- *Work through locals:* In all sites, relationship building involved engaging residents as members of the project staff team or as community animators and researchers. Resident participants brought with them an established knowledge of the community and existing relationships. They were instrumental in helping to bridge the gap between ANC and the

neighbourhoods. Sites sought out leaders and 'connectors' within the neighbourhoods who could help shape and implement the local organizing effort.

- *Invest in capacity building throughout:* Involving residents as organizers, animators and researchers was part of a broader effort to support neighbourhood capacity building throughout the development process. Various sites provided training sessions for residents to enable their participation in specific aspects of the initiative (e.g., community animation, small group facilitation, community surveys) but also to transfer skills required for the longer-term process of neighbourhood revitalization.

- *Build capacity of local organizations to engage in community development:* Not all community agencies have a community development orientation or personnel with appropriate skills. Structures such as the United Way can strengthen the neighbourhood process by helping local agencies to build capacity in this area.

- *Hear the soft voices:* Sites also recognized the need to be inclusive in their engagement process and to make special efforts to hear the voices of young people and various cultural and language groups that are not usually heard. In larger neighbourhoods, it was necessary to conceive this effort as a staged process to gradually reach a wider and wider set of neighbourhood residents.

- *Value informal connections:* A number of sites emphasized the value of informal relation- ships and conversations in addition to formal meetings and processes. In part, informal connections involve more personal exchanges that build relationships of trust. In part, these connections facilitate involvement of people who may be uncomfortable with more formal events or procedures. In addition, informal connections can be helpful for exploring arrangements that may involve adjustments in the roles of, or relations among, more formal structures.

- *Show tangible results early:* Sites generally agreed on the importance of achieving some tangible results early in the process in part to indicate progress to sponsors but more so to verify for neighbourhood residents the practical value of the initiative. Early results took different forms in different sites. In some cases, project managers helped residents make links to existing services as a way to address specific needs mentioned during initial information gathering activities. Sites also drew upon the National Film Board's involvement to sponsor youth video training projects. Training events for community animators and researchers as well as 'legacy documents' based on the community profiles developed during the project were also identified as tangible signs of progress.

- *Anticipate turbulence along the way:* Change is stressful. It can open up issues and relationships around which residents have different perspectives. It may also expose differences in approaches among the various agencies working to address neighbourhood

concerns. While difficult and challenging, such strains are often a positive indication that important issues are being addressed. The point is not to avoid tensions but to find productive ways of responding to them when they do arise. Conflict may, in fact, be a source of innovation.

importance of resident involvement

Finally, emerging from the experience of ANC's local sites has been a stronger appreciation of the ways in which resident participation is critical to the neighbourhood development process including:

- *Local knowledge*: Local people have an intimate knowledge of their community, the assets possessed by residents and the challenges they face. They also possess 'tacit' or informal knowledge about how their community works and are therefore in a position to determine how best to make things happen. Moreover, as the recipients of programs and services, residents know whether and how these supports are working for them: Are these addressing their needs? Can these supports be accessed when required and in appropriate combinations? Where are the gaps in existing arrangements?

- *Leadership development*: Active participation in the development process is essential for building local leadership that can sustain the revitalization process for the long term. Local sites have engaged both established and new leaders, and have created opportunities for leadership skills to be exercised and deepened.

- *Social capital*: Broad-based resident involvement is needed to build the social capital (networks, norms and trust) that enable people to work together to solve problems and realize opportunities. In all sites, linking residents with common backgrounds and interests has been important. In some cases, building bridges among different groups (e.g., various cultural and language groups; recent and established residents) has been critical for creating more cohesive communities.

- *Networks*: Resident involvement is also important because local networks can play a helpful role in spreading information about desirable opportunities. Word of mouth about ANC has already helped to engage residents in the process. As specific initiatives begin to develop, it is likely that such informal communication will be critical for reaching prospective participants and contributors.

- *Collective voice*: Finally, resident engagement and mobilization are required because wider systems, including government, often need to hear about desired changes through a strong collective voice from the neighbourhood. Moreover, it is local residents who are most likely to

maintain a consistent focus on neighbourhood issues and concerns. An organized base of residents is needed to maintain the attention of support structures on neighbourhood concerns over the long term.

Supporting neighbourhood revitalization

While work on the ground in neighbourhoods represents the core of the revitalization process, neighbourhoods do not possess all of the levers or resources needed to realize their goals. Support is required from various organizations and institutions, including the federal government. A major purpose of ANC has been to consider how these structures might adjust their operations to best enable neighbourhood revitalization.

Through research and discussion in the ANC Policy Dialogue, three broad measures were identified for improving connections between neighbourhoods and existing 'systems of support':

- Strengthening community *voice* and involvement
- Enhancing the *responsiveness* of government and other support structures
- Building *bridges* that enable government/community collaboration on an ongoing basis [Goetz and Gaventa 2001].

Reflecting on the ANC experience to date, residents from various sites highlighted the value of the relationships that they were beginning to build with various structures participating in the ANC process. In the words of one resident: "It feels like the federal government is reaching down and touching me…and I like it!" Others noted the importance of developing a connection between their neighbourhoods and the United Way movement, locally and nationally. Still others appreciated contributions from ANC's national partners such as the National Film Board's use of video as a tool for community development, coaching from Tamarack and Caledon's efforts to raise the profile of neighbourhood revitalization in public policy circles and support local involvement in policy development. Finally, in all sites, supportive links have begun to develop with organizations and institutions not formally part of ANC (e.g., universities, municipal governments and a variety of community and government agencies).

Those structures seeking to assist neighbourhood initiatives, notably the United Way, its national partners and the federal government, have been challenged to re-think their relationship to neighbourhoods. Important lessons have been learned. The following sections will focus primarily on the roles of the United Way and the federal government.

United Way: a facilitation and bridging role

Through ANC, the United Way of Canada and United Ways in the five sites have been exploring their emerging mission as community builders. Long known for its role as a funder of community services, the United Way movement adopted a new mission statement in 2003: "To improve lives and build community by engaging individuals and mobilizing collective action."

The impetus behind this change was a general recognition that no level of fundraising and allocations would be adequate for tackling the kinds of challenges communities are facing. Other strategies were needed to generate innovative solutions and coordinate the efforts of diverse partners. Given its local and national profile, and its relationships with the private, voluntary and public sectors, the United Way movement was ideally positioned to convene partners around the goal of building strong, healthy communities.

ANC has provided an opportunity for the United Way of Canada to coordinate partnerships on a pan-Canadian basis and for local United Ways to test community-building ideas in the context of neighbourhood revitalization. The initiative also offered a unique opportunity for national and local United Way organizations to collaborate in an action learning process. Together with Tamarack, Caledon and the National Film Board, the United Way has sought both to facilitate the neighbourhood process and bridge the gap that too often exists between local residents and wider systems of support, including the federal government.

Key observations about these efforts include:

engaging as partners and co-learners

Vital to the participation of the United Way and other national partners has been a willingness to engage with neighbourhoods not as funders or service providers but as partners and co-learners. This commitment allowed priority to be given to the reality of neighbourhoods and for support structures to consider how they might need to adjust their own outlooks and operations accordingly.

Throughout the initiative, United Way organizations locally and nationally created opportunities for the ANC experience to be shared widely with their respective Board and staff members. United Way boards participated in decision-making about the initiative from the outset, received updates as it proceeded and reflected on the implications for the ongoing work of their organizations. Members of the local ANC project teams participated in United Way staff meetings and retreats, and contributed to strategic thinking about the United Way's community building role. While all local United Ways treated ANC as a learning experience, some created specific structures to support that effort. For example, the United Way of Thunder Bay established a project steering committee that included participation from both United Way staff and experienced local community developers.

As a result of this learning-oriented engagement, both local and national United Way organizations have deepened their understanding of community building and have begun to make changes in their operations and structures. For instance, recognizing an ethical obligation to neighbourhood residents who had become involved in the initiative, the United Way of Halifax Region determined to make a five-year commitment to neighbourhood revitalization. It also began re-thinking how it structures its funding for community building purposes. Consideration is being given to establishing 'neighbourhood accounts' which would link allocations directly to the goals of neighbourhoods themselves rather than indirectly through the goals of community agencies.

Another example is the United Way of the Lower Mainland's shift over the course of the initiative from seeing ANC as a *stand-alone project* to identifying it as a *vehicle for meeting its mission*. This United Way also moved from seeing ANC as something that staff members from various departments should support *if their workload permitted* to simply being *part of their workload*. To facilitate this involvement, it is considering creating a 'cross-department team' to support ANC's work. Staff members from Communications and Marketing, Agency Relations and Allocations, and Research and Planning would be recruited to assist ANC and to bring lessons from ANC back to their departments.

Other national partners have identified similar adjustments in the nature or focus of their work based on their ANC experience. For example, the National Film Board has recognized the need to re-learn how it uses film to support community development by taking more direction from neighbourhoods themselves. In its policy work, the Caledon Institute recognized the need to focus more attention on the role of local communities in the policy development process.

Such shifts indicate the practical importance of support structures that are committed to working in partnership with neighbourhoods and prepared to learn and change through this involvement.

risks and opportunities

United Ways recognized both risks and opportunities associated with the shift to a community-building role and neighbourhood revitalization, in particular. While local United Ways had either previous experience in community building or growing interest in this approach, some had little involvement with neighbourhood revitalization specifically. The risk of the unknown was a concern in itself. There were also potential implications for relationships with community agencies and with donors.

In general, participation in ANC served to raise the profile of local United Ways and position them as significant players in neighbourhood issues. Their involvement also helped to strengthen their role as convenors of local collaborations. In some cases, the partnerships built through ANC

generated 'ripple effects.' New partners became contributors to other work in which the United Way was active.

Moreover, local United Ways found that both community agencies and donors welcomed their involvement in neighbourhood revitalization. Community agencies were supportive of the United Way's participation and saw it as complementary to their own efforts to address issues of concern to neighbourhoods. Donors also responded favourably. The United Way of Greater Toronto, for instance, found that many donors were keen to support the work in neighbourhoods because they perceived that it brought them closer to addressing key issues of concern to local people. A concerted effort has developed to link donors to aspects of the neighbourhood revitalization effort.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, neighbourhood revitalization also proved to have its challenges. As might be expected, the initiatives sometimes exposed divergent perspectives and priorities among participants, both within the neighbourhoods and among those in the 'system of support.' In Regina, for instance, the United Way and the Regina Inner City Partnership Program struggled to find a common path with respect to the nature and level of resident involvement in the revitalization process. Such tensions are an inevitable aspect of the change process but nevertheless require substantial investments of time, attention and leadership skills to address.

Tensions around the extent of resident involvement may also reveal underlying differences between community development processes and more conventional approaches to government and politics. More than one ANC site perceived that the idea of substantial resident participation in shaping government policies and programs met with substantial resistance from some elected and non-elected officials. On the one hand, officials may perceive that it is ultimately their responsibility to develop policies and programs, with residents simply being consulted for their ideas along the way. They may also be concerned about whether any one specific community group represents the perspective of all local residents, in which case government officials may play a necessary role, taking into account a wider range of local interests.

On the other hand, at least in the case of some individuals, the issue may involve a more fundamental clash between approaches to governance and politics in terms of 'power over' rather than 'power with.' Whereas the community development perspective being used in ANC seeks to strengthen voice and involvement of residents in shaping neighbourhood affairs, partisan politics and top-down modes of government may be at odds with such inclusive processes. Some ANC participants have wondered about the extent of culture change required for more participatory governance to be embraced and supported.

Finally, neighbourhood revitalization posed new challenges in another area of growing interest for United Ways and their donors – i.e., measuring impact. ANC's attention to developing a 'neighourhood vitality index' has therefore been of great interest to both local United Ways and federal government partners.

bridging

As support structures, a critical role that emerged for the United Way both locally and nationally involved closing the gap between grassroots development efforts and formal institutions, not least of all funders.

At the local level, ANC project teams sought to engage formal organizations, including government agencies, in the overall process. At the same time, they cautioned these support structures to hold back from initiating programs and services in the neighbourhoods until residents had sufficient time to determine their own priorities and objectives. This was particularly the case, for instance, in Surrey where the United Way of the Lower Mainland engaged community and government agencies as partners in the neighbourhood selection process itself. Such agencies were encouraged to continue following the process while neighbourhood residents became involved and gradually determined the issues they wished to address. In Halifax, the ANC project team used the allocation of funds from the ANC Project Pool (financing available to support initial neighbourhood projects) as an opportunity to encourage partnerships between local residents and community agencies. It was stipulated that proposals either had to be initiated by neighbourhood residents or have the backing of at least five members of the neighbourhood. As a result, local United Ways helped build closer, ongoing relations between neighbourhoods and their systems of support.

At the national level, the United Way of Canada along with other national partners worked to align the thinking of government sponsors and local sites with respect to anticipated outcomes from ANC's first phase. Although all partners affirmed the focus on community capacity building and recognized that 15 months was too limited both to build community involvement and realize substantial programmatic results (e.g., housing, employment, community safety, health or literacy), government partners continued to feel institutional pressures to show the link between community development process and the specific mandates of their respective organizations. The United Way worked with these partners to develop contribution agreements that recognized ANC's community building approach and subsequently to create a neighbourhood vitality index that would make it easier to link process and outcomes in ongoing neighbourhood initiatives.

coordinating overall partnership

United Way of Canada also held responsibility for coordinating the complex set of partnerships involved in ANC overall.

Given the short time frame of the initiative, there was limited opportunity to develop a fully integrated 'theory of change' to support the collective effort of all partners. Many aspects of the

initiative were undertaken concurrently: building relationships and implementing diverse facets of the project; designing research and documenting the work in progress; planning, analyzing and integrating as the initiative unfolded.

Whether at the national or local level, extensive partnerships take time to develop. Even when there is substantial shared understanding about the work at hand, weaving the practical elements of the work together in a streamlined and mutually supportive way can be difficult. It often takes several iterations, and then considerable ongoing effort, to align the various aspects of such initiatives. Significant resources are required to enable such collaborations to work.

In some respects, this is the nature of collaborative action research. On the other hand, such initiatives, especially when dealing with complex issues such as neighbourhood revitalization, often take place over a longer time period than was available in ANC's first phase. In ANC, what might have been an impossible situation was made tolerable by the efforts of the National Project Office and the substantial experience brought to the initiative by all partners. Not all collaborations can be expected to progress at a similar pace.

On the basis of the research, dialogue, action and reflection undertaken over the course of the initiative, a more integrated theory of change has now been developed. This theory of change will help 'wire together' the work of partners. It more fully articulates the thinking behind the local and national dimensions of the initiative, and the relationship between them. It provides a reference point for building the ongoing learning agenda. It focuses the research and evaluation process around a more fully developed set of outcome measures.

Federal Government: key element in the 'system of support'

As noted, ANC participants strongly affirmed the basic direction the federal government set in pursuing this initiative, particularly its support for resident engagement, community capacity building and collaboration across government organizations and with non-governmental partners. Moreover, the efforts of government officials involved in designing and implementing the initiative were considered exemplary.

At the same time, there were concerns from the outset about the mismatch between the short-term nature of the government's funding commitment and the long-term nature of neighbourhood revitalization, and about the institutional capacity of government to operate outside the 'silos' of its respective organizations. Like United Ways and other support structures, significant changes in culture and operations are needed if the approaches being explored in ANC are to survive outside the 'hothouse' of an exploratory project.

importance of policy work

Despite these concerns or because of them, participants confirmed that a focus on public policy and the role of government was a critical component of the initiative:

1. At some point, issues of concern to communities tend to run into a 'policy wall.' Appropriate shifts in public policy are inevitably needed before progress can be made.

2. Residents do have a stake and a role to play in helping to direct public funds to the most appropriate purposes in their neighbourhoods. Moreover, there are often insights and innovations at the community level that should inform the design of public policy. Only through some form of dialogue between community members and policy makers can local knowledge contribute to policy development.

3. Input from residents is important for building support from government for neighbourhood revitalization. Politicians, in particular, want to hear the views of citizens in addition to the policy analysis provided by civil servants and other policy experts.

4. Government is currently in the process of a broad shift from a relatively top down to a more participatory mode of governance. Residents have an interest in this participatory approach to government although it will take significant effort to help create it. In fact, not all in government support such a shift. The case continues to be made for the value of participatory governance, including quantitative measures of its efficiency and effectiveness.

It was also observed that the significance of policy tends to be overlooked simply because there is relatively little opportunity for citizens to consider how public policies affect their lives. Active engagement of policy issues is needed to restore appreciation for the practical importance of public policy.

uncertainty around the policy stream

While the significance of public policy for neighbourhood revitalization was recognized, participants identified challenges around how to incorporate policy issues into the neighbourhood development process. At the same time, the 'messiness' of trying to do so was regarded positively as a sign that work in this area involves operating 'outside the box.' It represents an opportunity to break new ground – creating new structures and processes for strengthening resident familiarity with policy issues and the policy making process, making government more flexible and responsive to neighbourhood concerns and establishing mechanisms that support this participatory, collaborative approach to governance.

In particular, local sites were uncertain about how and when to tackle policy issues. Related to this concern was the recognition that there were two major types of policy issues to be addressed: broad process issues pertaining to the ways in which governments interact with neighbourhoods and substantive policy issues pertaining to such matters as employment, education, housing, safety or health. Most sites perceived that the process issues were relatively remote from the lives of neighbourhood residents and chose to focus more on specific substantive issues to be identified through their neighbourhood visioning processes. Other sites were eager to develop new ways for residents to participate in the policy process itself. Thunder Bay, in particular, developed a focus in this area from early on and gradually established a 'policy validation group' as a mechanism to support a resident voice on policy issues.

During ANC's next phase, ways to integrate policy work into the local development process itself will be a focus of attention.

supporting horizontal initiatives

While neighbourhoods tend to face challenges engaging policy issues, governments in turn face challenges supporting long-term, collaborative initiatives such as ANC.

Although ANC's government partners were able to coordinate their involvement through two contribution agreements rather than five and through a single evaluation and accountability plan, doing so was difficult and time-consuming. It required finding ways to accommodate the different substantive and technical requirements of various government organizations, and melding the operating cultures of these organizations. Deeper changes in the procedures and cultures of the federal government appear to be needed in order to make it easier to undertake horizontal collaborations.

Underlying government's efforts at 'horizontal management' are many of the same community building dynamics involved in neighbourhood development. As with neighbourhoods, the short time frame of ANC constrained the relationship building efforts that are key to aligning activities across the various dimensions of the federal government – i.e., different departments and agencies, national headquarters, and regional or local offices. Specific issues identified through the ANC initiative range from the relatively narrow to much broader questions of how government approaches the work of building strong neighbourhoods.

- *Stronger intra-government communication*: While a substantial degree of collaboration among government officials from different organizations and in different roles was noteworthy in ANC, still further efforts are required on the part of government to bring its resources together in support of such initiatives. For instance, strong support from the national offices of government partners did not translate consistently into comparable support from regional offices. In some cases, regional officials were not aware of ANC and/or did not recognize it

as a significant part of their work plans. In these instances, it fell to local sites to foster engagement by local officials.

Additionally, while there was considerable involvement from both the policy and operations sides of government in the design and implementation of ANC, it was observed that still closer collaboration was needed in the future. This was particularly the case in terms of translating policy concepts such as 'community capacity building' or 'holistic approaches' into measurable forms that could be specified in contribution agreements and tracked through evaluation processes.

- *Engaging as partners*: Critical to ANC was the effort to link government and neighbour-hoods as 'partners': sharing responsibility for achieving desired goals, responsive to their respective needs, learning together. Such a relationship, however, requires more time and energy from government officials than does the traditional role of funder. As happens too often in horizontal initiatives, some government officials were not allotted adequate time in their work plans to participate fully in the initiative. It became a demanding and, in some cases, impossible responsibility to fulfill on top of a full slate of 'regular' responsibilities.

- *Staff turnovers and succession planning*: Engaging as partners has other important implications. For instance, partnership building requires stable relationships. The high degree of mobility of government officials from one position and organization to another tends to undermine the partnership building process. Shared experiences, collective knowledge, trust and communication are disrupted when participants change. One partial solution to this problem is careful attention to succession planning as any official is preparing to move to a new position. Overlap in participation between old and new participants is needed in order to smooth the transition. Strategies are also required for transferring knowledge from outgoing to incoming officials. In many respects, this challenge was well handled within ANC. It was noted, however, that the development of strategies for knowledge transfer was more the exception than the rule when it comes to horizontal initiatives.

- *Specifying the links between community capacity building processes and the mandates of individual government partners*: In part, horizontal initiatives tend to receive weak support from the participating government organizations because of the concern about whether and how these intiatives are addressing the priority mandates of each organization. This was a recurring question throughout ANC's first phase. The recent work around a theory of change, logic model and index of neighbourhood vitality is intended to help address this concern. Overall, however, the ANC experience suggests that individual government organizations might want to recast their objectives from ends-in-themselves to contributions to an overarching goal: building the assets of individuals and communities. The question then becomes less about whether the immediate goals of individual government organizations are being served and more about how best those organizations can contribute to the common goal of neighbourhood

revitalization. As discussed earlier, an asset-based, resident-led approach to neighbourhood development is effectively a prevention strategy through which government agencies can work together proactively to overcome risk factors where they are joined 'upstream' rather than addressing them on a more costly reactive basis as discrete problems 'downstream.'

- *High level and sustained commitment*: Ultimately, horizontal initiatives addressing complex issues need support from the highest levels of government, including elected officials; central agencies such as Treasury Board, Finance and the Privy Council Office; and senior civil servants. In other jurisdictions examined as part of ANC's work, notably the UK, a national policy framework articulating government's commitment to neighbourhood revitalization and mandating support from all relevant branches of government, has been instrumental for advancing the work. However, such initiatives undeniably require substantial upfront investments and must be sustained over a period of time to see their benefits. These arrangements should not be entered into lightly; nor should they be withdrawn from lightly either. Effective use of government resources is not the only or even the main consideration here. Residents of participating neighbourhoods deserve the due respect of partners who take seriously their commitment of energy, resources and hope, and are prepared to join in that commitment.

As one government participant observed, the active involvement of government officials in ANC has served to create a deeper sense of accountability to all partners in the process and particularly to neighbourhood residents. Such engagement as partners and co-learners is vital to appreciating the dynamics and potential of neighbourhood revitalization. In the year ahead, ANC looks forward to the involvement of federal government officials at all levels as closer consideration is given to establishing a long-term national strategy for neighbourhood revitalization.

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