


INSPIRED LEARNING

An Evaluation of Vibrant Communities' National Supports

 2002 – 2012



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The Vibrant Communities (VC) campaign, which began in 2002, was mandated by its three sponsors – Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, and The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation – to perform an end of campaign evaluation in two phases.

Phase one (December 2009-July 2010) – identifying the questions VC stakeholders wished to see addressed in the final evaluation and forming initial conclusions based on data and studies resulting from the work of Vibrant Communities.

Phase two (July 2010 to Spring 2012) – deepening the understanding of phase one conclusions incorporating additional data collection and analysis.

This paper is the report of the findings of phase two of the end-of-campaign evaluation.

For further information on Vibrant Communities, visit the VC websites at www.vibrantcommunities.ca or read the VC book, *Creating Vibrant Communities: How Individuals and Organizations from Diverse Sectors of Society are Coming Together to Reduce Poverty in Canada*. (For details see http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2_books2.html)

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[FOREWORD]



When I joined the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation early in 2003, the Vibrant Communities program was barely six months old and faced an uncertain future. President Tim Brodhead and Program Director Katharine Pearson worried about philanthropic hubris in proposing to reduce poverty at a meaningful scale. Our partner, Tamarack Institute, was introducing a methodology called a 'comprehensive community initiative' that had been developed in the United States, and there were doubts it would work in Canada. To underscore the point, the 'Trail Builder' communities selected to take part in the initial phase had held numerous meetings and discussions about poverty, but there was little evidence that they were engaged in its reduction. But if there were concerns, there were also reasonable expectations for success. Tamarack had produced groundbreaking work on poverty reduction in the Kitchener-Waterloo area with Opportunities 2000, and the Foundation had experience funding a national community economic development program called CEDTAP.

Vibrant Communities would provide funding and coaching to local collaborative planning tables to reduce poverty according to local priorities. It would also engage the participants in a national learning community. A third national partner, the Caledon Institute, would distill the lessons learned into deeper reflections on the nature of, and solutions to poverty, thereby generating policy recommendations for governments.

This volume is evidence that these expectations were well founded. Vibrant Communities has had an enduring and beneficial influence on thousands of low income families in dozens of communities across Canada. It has also shaped the work of The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, and philanthropy more broadly, through the work of the Vibrant Communities funders group . One lesson for us is that social innovations introduced

[FORWARD]



at multiple levels of scale often involve different and considerable 'lag times' as actors in a system get to know one another and adopt new ways of working. All the more reason for funders to temper their insistence on results with patience, and to invest for the long term. A second conclusion is that complex systems involve solutions that evolve over time. Vibrant Communities' evolution over the past decade coincided with the rapid spread of the internet. Webinars and downloadable resources have - many times over - multiplied the program's reach and impact.

Finally, Vibrant Communities' architecture highlights the close relationship between social innovation and societal learning. It shows us that it is possible to transform complex problems such as poverty into evolutionary processes of continual adaptation.

In setting out to reduce poverty, Vibrant Communities has produced results of value to us all.

Stephen Huddart

President and CEO

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS]



This report would not be possible without the generous and thoughtful contributions of several people. I would like to thank Mark Cabaj for his many inputs and suggestions throughout the entire process, Eric Leviten-Reid for producing the mini-case stories, Dr. Josh Evans for sharing his research on several VC communities and for integrating some of our questions into his methods, and Mike Toye for enabling us to access some rich input from VC's francophone communities.

An interpretation group consisting of a diverse set of perspectives helped to 'test-drive' some initial conclusions. Thank you to Bill Beatty, Dan Clement, Brenda Doner, Garry Loewen, Wendy MacDermott, Dan Meades, Eric Leviten-Reid, Penny Rowe, Dana Vocisano and Liz Weaver for your input and perspective.

Lastly, I would like to recognize the efforts of the Vibrant Communities Steering Committee. As one of the primary users of this evaluation, they provided valuable input throughout the process. They have also been tireless in their stewardship of the decade long Vibrant Communities effort. The members of the Vibrant Communities Steering Committee are: Sherri Torjman and Anne Makhoul, Caledon Institute of Social Policy; Tim Brodhead and Dana Vocisano, J.W. McConnell Family Foundation; Paul Born, Mark Cabaj, Eric Leviten-Reid and Liz Weaver, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement.

Jamie Gamble

Principal, Imprint Inc.

[SUMMARY]



Vibrant Communities (VC) was a ten-year action research initiative through which 13 Canadian communities experimented with ways to make a deeper impact in reducing poverty by applying the lessons of comprehensive community initiatives. The objectives were to reduce poverty, increase engagement, change public policy and unleash community innovation.

VC was established in 2002 through the partnership of three national sponsors – Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation – and a series of local communities across the country. Tamarack was responsible for overall leadership and was the strategy and 'how-to' think-tank. The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation provided grants to Trail Builder communities, hosted periodic funders' forums and shaped the dissemination strategy. The Caledon Institute served as the social policy think tank behind the project.

In 2010, the sponsors of Vibrant Communities published the evaluation report "Evaluating Vibrant Communities: 2002-2010." This report was an end-of-campaign review of the outcomes of Trail Builder efforts, and this evaluation told us that by using a VC approach, we are better able to assist a large number of people in their journey out of poverty, address more than one root cause of poverty and contribute to deep and durable impacts.

The national sponsors provided and managed major supports for the Vibrant Communities initiative. Such national supports were designed to complement and leverage – rather than replace – the financial resources and technical expertise available at the local level. Resources were provided to support the core work of Trail Builder communities who

would explore ways to put the Vibrant Communities principals into action in their local settings while sharing their insights and experiences with one another through a pan- Canadian learning community. Vibrant Communities provided a variety of ways to link members of the Learning Community and encouraged them to support and learn from each other, including a primary coach who helped create and evolve the group's overall approach, an extensive website, a regular e-newsletter, monthly convener calls, tele-learning sessions with experts on various issues, communities of practice on topics of special interest to participants, aids for action designed specifically for Vibrant Communities and occasional face-to-face gatherings.

National sponsors would concurrently mine, distill and evaluate the experiences and learnings of the participating communities. The insights and ideas that emerged were disseminated through various mechanisms to a variety of audiences beyond the project partners.

Vibrant Communities was launched in order to achieve an ambitious goal: exploring, mining, and disseminating a new practice to reduce poverty. Funders, intermediaries, and local groups working in communities who share features with VC, namely, an action learning agenda, a diverse national network, and efforts aimed at tackling a



complex issue in a comprehensive and multi-sector way, can learn from the experience of VC and the ten year commitment to implementing and learning the initiative.

This report concludes that the national supports were a good investment in money, time and energy. Supports were important to Trail Builder's local poverty reduction efforts, and as community dialogues around poverty gained momentum, supports helped consolidate local awareness and knowledge around poverty reduction and ultimately contributed to the emergence of constructive conversations about poverty.

VC supports invigorated local processes by injecting energy and inspiration. They also enabled the creation of a shared language that afforded local participants a common base for communication. When coupled with financial incentives, this common base provided the foundation for a new learning orientation. Collaborative and community-based learning translated into valuable strategies in multiple communities. The supports helped communities to access the ideas and experience base of other communities, facilitating learning about specific challenges or issues, or new program or policy ideas.

The supports provided an ongoing reinforcement of VC principles and contributed to a shared identity that brought broader recognition and legitimacy to the overall approach. Trail Builders reported several ways in which the supports influenced their approach and furthered the overall progress of their community's efforts. Without the supports, the role of the organization and the nature of its relationship to the community would have been different.

The link between the experience of the Trail Builder communities and the policy expertise of the Caledon Institute was ground breaking. It was a first in Canada for a social policy institute to maintain such a lengthy and intense period of connection with an on-the-ground poverty reduction initiative. The result was policy work that was grounded in community practice and perspective.

Tangible support like helping with problem solving, sharing of program or policy initiatives and providing evaluation assistance works in combination with more intangible elements of the supports: theories of change, shared language and options for governance. There is a high level of skills required to effectively deliver comprehensive supports: facilitation, writing, supporting networks and building relationships require sophisticated expertise. When a high level of engagement in exploring and learning is desired, funding is a critical incentive and mechanism for enabling robust participation.

There are clear benefits to establishing an interconnected architecture of supports in situations where the burden of learning is high. Peers from other communities can help organizations to innovate and to move more quickly in implementing new approaches and initiatives. VC has shown that the mix of supports was instrumental in building capacity, facilitating the uptake of VC principles and generating insights and lessons about poverty reduction and comprehensive community initiatives. The bottom line is that in the realm of complex issues and comprehensive efforts to mobilize learning and new approaches, the full suite of supports offered through VC was an essential ingredient in its ultimate success.

1 [INTRODUCTION]



OVERVIEW OF VC

As 13 communities from across Canada experimented with new and innovative approaches to poverty reduction, they emphasized a focus on reducing (not alleviating) poverty, collaboration across sectors, comprehensive thinking and action, building on community assets, and a long-term process of learning and change. Vibrant Communities' multi-year, multiple site experimentation offers a unique opportunity for research and learning.

Founded by Paul Born in 2002, Vibrant Communities was a ten-year action research initiative. Its purpose was to test how to make a deeper impact in reducing poverty by applying the lessons of other comprehensive community initiatives, including those learned from Opportunities 2000 (OP2000). Operating in the Kitchener-Waterloo region of Ontario in the mid-to-late 1990s, OP2000 showed how communities could expand their capacity for strategic poverty reduction work.

VC was established through the partnership of three national sponsors – Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation – and a series of local communities across the country. As it evolved, VC gained the support of a number of other funding partners, including the Maytree Foundation, the Hamilton Community Foundation – The Young Fund, RBC Financial Group, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

The three national sponsors provided and managed major supports for the Vibrant Communities initiative. Tamarack was responsible for overall leadership and was the strategy and 'how-to' think-tank. It also provided coaching to communities and facilitated the learning community. The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation provided grants to Trail Builder communities, hosted periodic funders' forums and shaped the dissemination strategy. Financial supports were provided in the form of matching funds for four phases of local activity: exploration, planning, action learning and sustainability. The Caledon Institute served as the social policy think tank behind the project. It documented effective practices and the work of Trail Builders, and brought to the surface and created awareness of the policy implications of the Vibrant Communities experience.



WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT VIBRANT COMMUNITIES OUTCOMES

In 2010, the sponsors of Vibrant Communities published the evaluation report "Evaluating Vibrant Communities: 2002-2010." This report was an end-of-campaign review of the outcomes of Trail Builder efforts, and conclusions about the effectiveness of the Vibrant Communities approach for reducing poverty.

This evaluation told us that through Vibrant Communities, individuals and households are building the assets required to meet their needs on a sustainable basis. The systems that shape people's circumstances are being reworked in constructive ways. Communities are building awareness of their local poverty challenges and the capacity to address it. The high number of assets generated and low-income Canadians who have benefitted are an indicator of the strengths of the community processes undertaken by Vibrant Communities Trail Builders. They are grappling with poverty in new and significant ways.

The evaluation also reminded us that complex issues need a different kind of traction, which a VC approach supports. Even if conveners do everything right, a comprehensive, community initiative can be challenging to implement, and it takes time. There are clear benefits to meeting this challenge, however: communities using a VC approach are able to attract significant resources, engage a broad and diverse range of multi-sector leadership, raise the profile and understanding of poverty and introduce innovative solutions. This contributes to a community's ability to influence substantive public policies related to poverty, strengthen links and coordination of responses to poverty, and shape private-sector practices.

Using a VC approach, we are better able to assist a large number of people in their journey out of poverty, address more than one root cause of poverty and contribute to deep and durable impacts.

Various communities as well as individuals found different paths. In some cases, the results have been relatively powerful and, in others, less so. Such variation is not terribly surprising. Progress is made in one area while new challenges emerge in others. Solutions that work in one situation don't apply in another. The work of Vibrant Communities over the past ten years has been about prototyping: Testing out certain approaches knowing that they will manifest themselves in different ways in different circumstances. This experiment is a rich source of experience for understanding how best to realize the full potential of ideas and practices. The bottom line is that this approach changes communities; under the right conditions, the impact can be powerful.

Key Numbers in Vibrant Communities
439,435 poverty reducing benefits to 202,931 households in Canada
256 poverty reducing initiatives completed or in progress by local Trail Builders
\$22.8 million invested in local Trail Builder activity
2,278 organizations partnering in Trail Builder communities
1,539 individuals playing substantial roles including 840 people who are living in poverty
53 substantive government policy changes

1 [INTRODUCTION]



<p>Summary of Conclusions from the Report: Evaluating Vibrant Communities have experimented with a VC approach for ten years. In this time they have demonstrated the following:</p>	
Effects on Community Will and Capacity	<p>A VC approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports the development of new ideas and strategic solutions for reducing poverty • Raises the profile of poverty in the local setting and contributes to a deepened appreciation of challenges and possible solutions • Engages a broad and diverse set of organizations and leaders • Attracts resources to support a more ambitious effort to reduce poverty • Can sometimes cause, or be affected by, tension or apparent duplication with other efforts
Effects on Systems and Policy Change	<p>A VC approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influences government policies related to poverty • Influences new thinking, policies, and practices in the private sector • Strengthens the links between groups in their communities, resulting in better-coordinated responses to poverty challenges • Influences information-flow and decision-making processes • Contributes to poverty reduction activity at other levels
Effects on Individual and Household Poverty Reduction Benefits	<p>A VC approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributes to initiatives that assist many households in their journeys out of poverty • Contributes to initiatives that address more than one root cause of poverty • Positively affects the overall level of poverty in a community
Lessons About Effectiveness	<p>When using a VC approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A large number of factors are relevant to successful outcomes • The progress that communities are able to make in areas of reduced poverty, systems change, and community capacity is uneven • Communities with the greatest effects share some common characteristics • The VC principles manifest in different patterns, each with different characteristics and prospects for poverty reduction outcomes



METHODS: WHAT THIS REPORT COVERS

This report picks up where the 2010 evaluation leaves off. It focuses on the role of VC's national supports, including coaching, funding, the learning community and dissemination of learning. This report examines the use of supports, their collective value to Trail Builders, when they are considered most useful and the different ways in which communities respond to the variety of supports. This report does not examine Trail Builder activities and their effects – these were explored in the 2010 report "Evaluating Vibrant Communities: 2002-2010."

Understanding the role of learning and capacity supports is important because Vibrant Communities is important. The attention that "Evaluating Vibrant Communities: 2002-2010" has received tells us there is great interest in understanding comprehensive community initiatives and the overall approach and strategies used throughout Vibrant Communities. The supports are a critical part of that understanding.

DATA SOURCES

A variety of data sources are used in this evaluation. Given that this evaluation comes at the end of a decade-long initiative, there are some practical limits to what a retrospective perspective can inform. Some people who were involved in the early days of Vibrant Communities are no longer involved. Some are new to communities' efforts, and so tend to reflect more on recent activity and experience when compared to those with a longer history with the project. To compensate for this, individuals who

are no longer involved with VC but whose early input helped shape the initiative were identified and asked to provide survey responses.

It is also important to note that the ultimate assessment of the supports is based on a consideration of the whole. The various supports are examined independently; however, caution is advised in drawing conclusions about whether certain supports are more important than others. As this evaluation will reveal, the supports are part of a complete architecture and are mutually reinforcing.

The evaluation used the following sources of data to answer evaluation questions relating to the national supports:

- Two web-based surveys were implemented. The first was addressed to local staff and core partners of Trail Builder communities, and the second to non-Trail Builders who read the 'Engage!' newsletter or participated in tele-learning sessions. Both surveys asked:
 - User observations on patterns of usage
 - User opinion questions on the perceived value of the supports
 - Questions about the extent supports affected the local poverty reduction effort

1 [INTRODUCTION]



DATA SOURCES CONTINUED

- More in-depth research¹ and analysis on five of the Trail Builder communities: Winnipeg, Edmonton, Victoria, Saint-Michel (Montréal) and Hamilton. These were selected as a representative set of examples that are reflective of different Trail Builder experiences and contexts.
- Four illustrative cases describing the link between supports and the benefits derived by Trail Builder communities
- Tamarack provided internally-collected data on website usage, tele-learning participation and budget requirements for providing supports
- Key Caledon and Tamarack documents relating to the national supports were reviewed
- Throughout the evaluation process, Tamarack and Caledon staff were available for questions and provided commentary as requested
- An ad hoc committee was formed to review preliminary findings and provide additional perspective. This group consisted of representatives from three VC Trail Builder communities, one VC coach, two Tamarack national staff (also coaches) and one peer from another organization (also a national intermediary)

¹ These interviews were conducted as part of research undertaken by Dr. Josh Evans', a Professor of Geography at Athabasca University. Mike Toye conducted the research on Saint-Michel (Montréal) using the same interview guide.

2 [SUPPORTING A GRAND EXPERIMENT]



WHY VIBRANT COMMUNITIES?

The impetus behind Vibrant Communities was the recognition that efforts to reduce poverty in Canada had stalled, despite the undeniable prosperity enjoyed by so many. Estimates of the percentage of Canadians with low incomes go back to 1976 when the rate was 13.0%. The low-income rate rose during the recessions of the early 1980s, 1990s, and late 2000s, and fell during periods of economic recovery. But while the rate of poverty has fluctuated with the state of the economy, there has been no underlying decrease in poverty in more than 30 years. New ways of tackling the problem were required.

A NEW DIRECTION

Vibrant Communities is part of a new wave of community work known as “comprehensive community initiatives.” Since the 1990s, community groups in the United States, Canada and elsewhere have been experimenting with ways of tackling the multiple and interrelated factors contributing to poverty and other complex issues.

In large measure, these initiatives were a reaction to the limitations of earlier approaches that tended to focus on individual issues in isolation from one another. While effective at directing resources to specific concerns such as health,

crime, education, housing or employment, these programs were ill suited to tackling the connections among them.

The aim of comprehensive community initiatives is to engage a wide array of partners in a concerted effort to tackle the diverse factors that contribute to poverty.

Vibrant Communities was an experiment to see what this approach could yield in terms of outcomes, and to better understand and strengthen the practice of working within a comprehensive community initiative framework for poverty reduction.

2 [SUPPORTING A GRAND EXPERIMENT]



At the time, the principles of Vibrant Communities and the strategies underlying the approach were informed by Opportunities 2000; leading institutions including the Aspen Institute and the Annie E. Casey Foundation; and the community economic development field (many of the Vibrant Communities founders had an active involvement in this area).

Katharine Pearson of The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation published "Accelerating Impact" in 2007. This paper reflects several ideas that had been circulating among the VC sponsors in the early days of Vibrant Communities. Among them were considerations of how funders could help social innovation by connecting innovators with sources of expertise. This would include creating communication platforms that could connect interested individuals to sources of information (e.g., a research network, think tank or university-based program). Linking people with similar interests with whom they could work would enhance their learning and practice, particularly in the areas of planning and management and the development of a rigorous evidence base appropriate to their context or the phase of their work. Innovators could be provided with coaching support that could both accelerate learning and provide inspiration for new areas or types of work.



THE EXPERIMENT

Vibrant Communities is an experiment designed to test a specific way of addressing the complex realities of poverty through local action. It was not a “model” that was replicated across the country but a set of core principles adapted to various local settings. It included a set of national supports to facilitate these efforts. To generate significant reductions in poverty, sponsors and participating communities developed five core principles to guide their work:

- *Poverty Reduction* – a focus on reducing poverty as opposed to alleviating the hardships of living in poverty
- *Comprehensive Thinking and Action* – addressing the interrelated root causes of poverty rather than its various symptoms
- *Multisectoral Collaboration*– engaging individuals and organizations from at least four key sectors – business, government, non-profit organizations, and low-income residents – in a joint effort to counter poverty

- *Community Asset Building* – building on community strengths rather than focusing on deficits
- *Community Learning and Change* – embracing a long-term process of learning and change rather than simply undertaking a series of specific interventions

THE 5 PUZZLE PIECES



2 [SUPPORTING A GRAND EXPERIMENT]



The theory of change underlying Vibrant Communities was simple: Guided by these five principles – and assisted by extra program supports provided by national sponsors – local organizations and leaders could revitalize poverty reduction efforts in their communities and generate significantly improved outcomes. In particular, they would:

- Dispel the sense that little could be done to address poverty except soften its blows
- Shift the focus from the various parts of the problem to the relationships among them
- Create the mechanisms needed for diverse partners to work together to tackle a wide range of interconnected issues
- Engage the “unusual suspects,” including people in poverty (whose insights into solutions are too often overlooked) and business (which may not perceive poverty reduction as an issue for which it shares responsibility)
- Replenish the stock of ideas about what can be done to reduce poverty

This was the theory. The task of Vibrant Communities was to assess its validity by exploring three broad questions: How would diverse communities manifest these principles in practice? What kinds of outcomes could they generate over a period of several years? What kind of supports – if any – would enhance their capacity to operationalize these principles and achieve the desired reductions in poverty?

THE STRUCTURE

The Vibrant Communities initiative employed a simple organizational structure:

Trail Builders – a series of urban collaboratives unfolding poverty reduction initiatives in their local settings

National Sponsors – three national sponsors providing guidance and support for the overall initiative

Pan-Canadian Learning Community – a network through which local and national partners could learn together about the challenges and opportunities of the approach being explored, building their knowledge and know-how in the process.



THE SUPPORTS

The national sponsors provided and managed major supports for the Vibrant Communities initiative. Such national supports were characterized as 'extras' and were designed to complement and leverage – rather than replace – the financial resources and technical expertise available at the local level.

In exchange for these supports, each Trail Builder community was expected to meet a set of basic requirements:

- Set a numerical poverty reduction target for its work and contribute to achieving the national targets set for assisting households with reduced poverty and engaging multi-sector partners
- Develop a community plan for poverty reduction reflecting a comprehensive approach
- Establish a multi-sector leadership table including participation from business, government, non-profit organizations and people with lived experience of poverty
- Design a learning plan and participate in the pan-Canadian learning community
- Secure the necessary financial and in-kind resources to support the convening, facilitation, research and other work required to pursue a comprehensive, collaborative initiative
- Provide narrative and statistical reports on the progress of its work as described in the Vibrant Communities learning and evaluation process for Trail Builder initiatives

THREE LEVELS OF THE SUPPORTS

In order to encourage and support this experiment, national sponsors and member communities set out to create a dynamic action learning process, operating at three interconnected levels.

Resources were provided to support the core work of Trail Builder communities who would explore ways to put the puzzle pieces into action in their local settings while sharing their insights and experiences with one another through a pan-Canadian learning community.

National sponsors would concurrently mine, distill and evaluate the experiences and learnings of the participating communities.

The insights and ideas that emerged were disseminated through various mechanisms to a variety of audiences beyond the project partners.

1. Resources to Support the Core Work of Trail Builders (networking, planning, evaluation, communication strategies).

The final VC grant program included one-time exploration grants of \$5,000 to explore local interest in participating in VC; one-time matched \$20,000 grants to develop a multi-sector leadership group and a comprehensive plan; a four year action-learning process supported with annual grants of \$100,000 (matched one-to-one by local partners); and, finally, sustainability grants for up to three years of \$50,000/year (matched two-to-one by local partners).

2 [SUPPORTING A GRAND EXPERIMENT]



Trail Builders also received targeted coaching support and advice with the purpose of helping local efforts navigate the complex challenges of reducing poverty and experimenting with the core principles of VC. Direct evaluation support was included to: (a) establish a national evaluation system and (b) provide local groups the technical assistance they required to develop and implement their evaluation plans.

Tools and templates were developed and provided to Trail Builders. These were initially based on documents designed for OP2000, but later reflected the learning generated by Trail Builders themselves.

2. A Learning Community to Mine and Distil Lessons from the Trail Builder Experience

The learning community included Trail Builders who were implementing with their own action-learning in their communities, would-be early adopters who would observe Trail Builder activities in order to reduce their own learning curves, and national sponsors who would organize and facilitate learning activities.

The activities of the learning community included:

- Monthly tele-conference calls for local updates and to talk about the project in general
- Periodic face-to-face meetings (usually in Ontario) to dig deeper into learnings

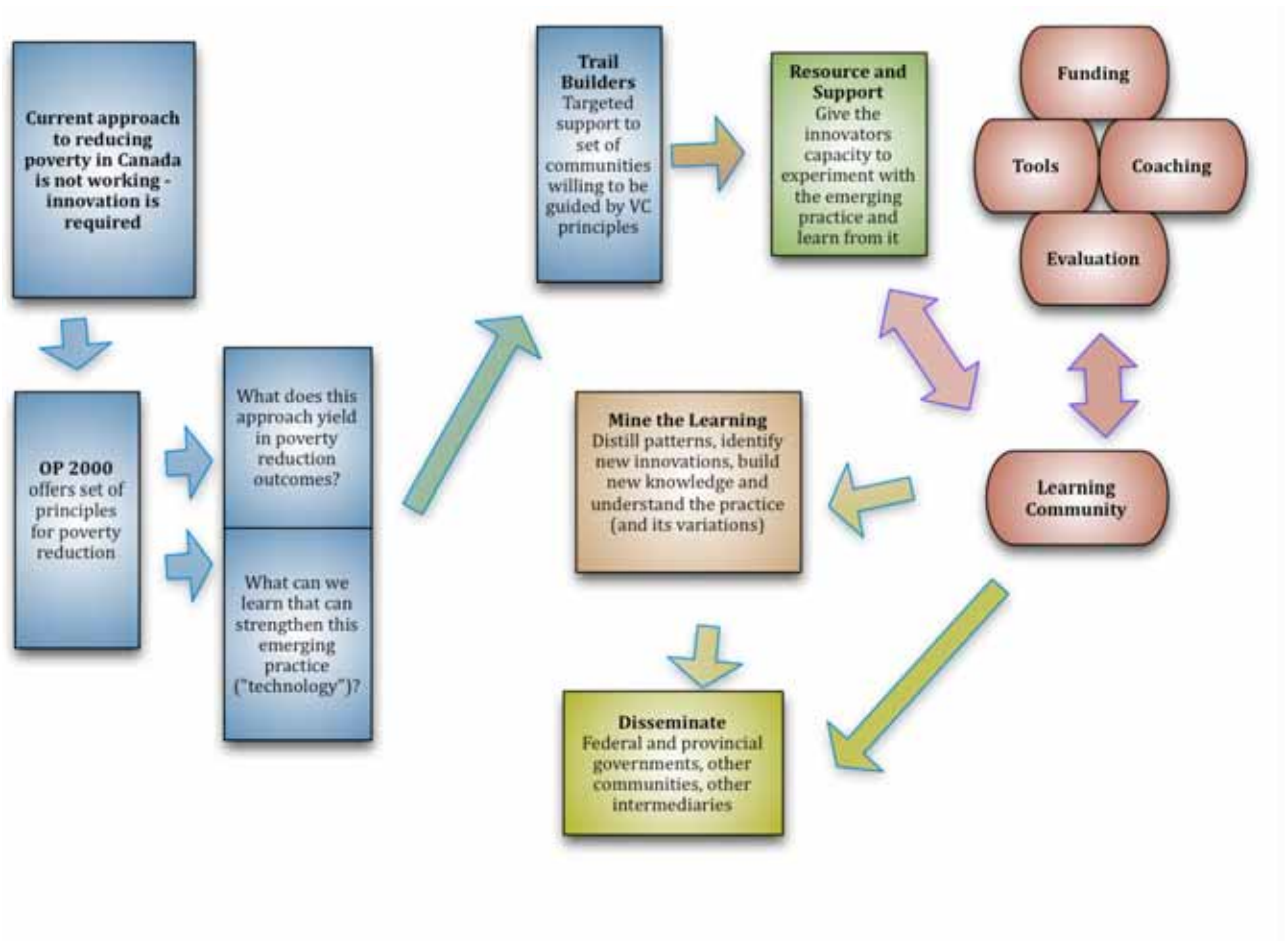
- Short term topic groups that would get together on the phone (e.g. policy change, engaging business)
- Evaluation and coaches identifying issues that were fed into the learning community for further exploration; these later might be turned into tools and other knowledge products
- Emergent connections between communities.

3. Mechanisms to Disseminate Learnings Beyond the Project Partners

Dissemination occurred horizontally to other communities in Canada, and vertically to funders and policy makers (e.g., the federal government). The dissemination effort was intended to intensify over time as the learnings become more numerous, concrete and robust. Thought pieces were written about key issues related to the approach (e.g., comprehensiveness) as well as papers on promising and best practices (e.g., social policy roles for local government).



THE THREE LEVELS OF SUPPORTS



3 [UNDERSTANDING SUPPORTS]



AN OVERALL ARCHITECTURE: COMPLEXITY

How we describe supports indicates our understanding of their role and place in our work. The simple to complex continuum is a way of distinguishing between different kinds of contexts, problems, and situations.²

Simple	Complicated	Complex
Highly replicable, responsive in predictable ways to standardized interventions	Technically difficult but causal links exist, requires expertise and coordination of multiple interventions	Interdependent elements resulting in unpredictable interactions, stakeholders often in conflict over nature of the issue and how to proceed

If we framed Vibrant Communities as a 'simple' initiative, we might see the supports as a consumer-supplier relationship whereby national partners provide the supports and the communities use them. But poverty – like Vibrant Communities – is not simple, it is complex, the supports form an integrated architecture that

work together like the strands of a web. They are part of an ecosystem of social feedback and learning. Learning is understood to be multi-directional. Supports were developed with the intent that learning would flow across communities, and back and forth between the national and local partners.

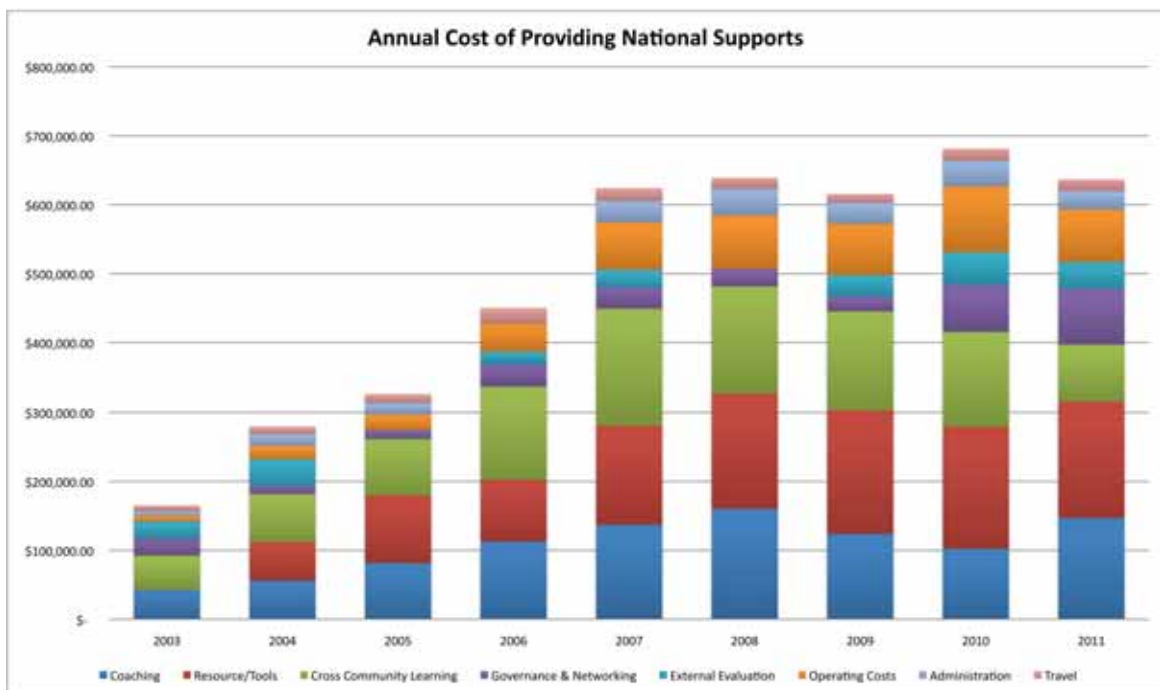
² For a practical and accessible description of complexity see Westley, Frances, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Quinn Patton, *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*. 2006: Random House Canada.



WHAT IT TOOK TO SUPPORT THE SUPPORTS

The range of supports that were part of Vibrant Communities required a substantial investment. In the initial years of 2002 and 2003, an annual investment of \$180,000 (2002) and \$165,000 (2003) was made. This grew as VC expanded, peaking in 2010 when the budget for providing supports rose to \$680,000.

The chart below illustrates how the distribution of investment grew over time, and how the budget for different elements varied over the tenure of VC.



3 [UNDERSTANDING SUPPORTS]



As the amount overall budget for supports changed from year to year, the proportion allocated to different supports remained roughly the same, most notably:

- The amount allocated to coaching ranged from 20-25% of the overall budget, declining in the latter years
- The amount allocated to resources and tools ranged from 20-30%
- The amount allocated to cross community learning ranged from 25-30%

Beyond the financial resources needed for the supports lay the combined capabilities of Tamarack, Caledon and McConnell. We cannot analyze what it takes to provide supports solely in financial

terms. The national partners – and this is ultimately reflective of the personnel involved – brought an expertise in facilitation, process design, research, writing, presentation, the nurturing of networks and substantial knowledge of poverty reduction. This is not just the facilitative and administrative contributions of Tamarack: it is the behind the scenes work of Caledon in preparing policy papers and connecting emerging insights from VC into national conversations, and the expertise of McConnell in social innovation and dissemination.

An effort of this nature is not just about cognitive skills. Stewardship of a collaborative space requires the capacity to navigate politics and interpersonal dynamics. Stewardship is what keeps a diverse set of individuals and organizations engaged in a process.

THE NATIONAL SPONSORS

Vibrant Communities was led nationally by a collaboration of three organizations: Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. These organizations worked together as a Steering Committee to guide the initiative and their representatives were involved in the day-to-day operations of the national supports.

While each organization brought unique expertise and took on distinct roles, many efforts were jointly planned and executed. The diagram below illustrates the structure at the outset of Vibrant Communities.



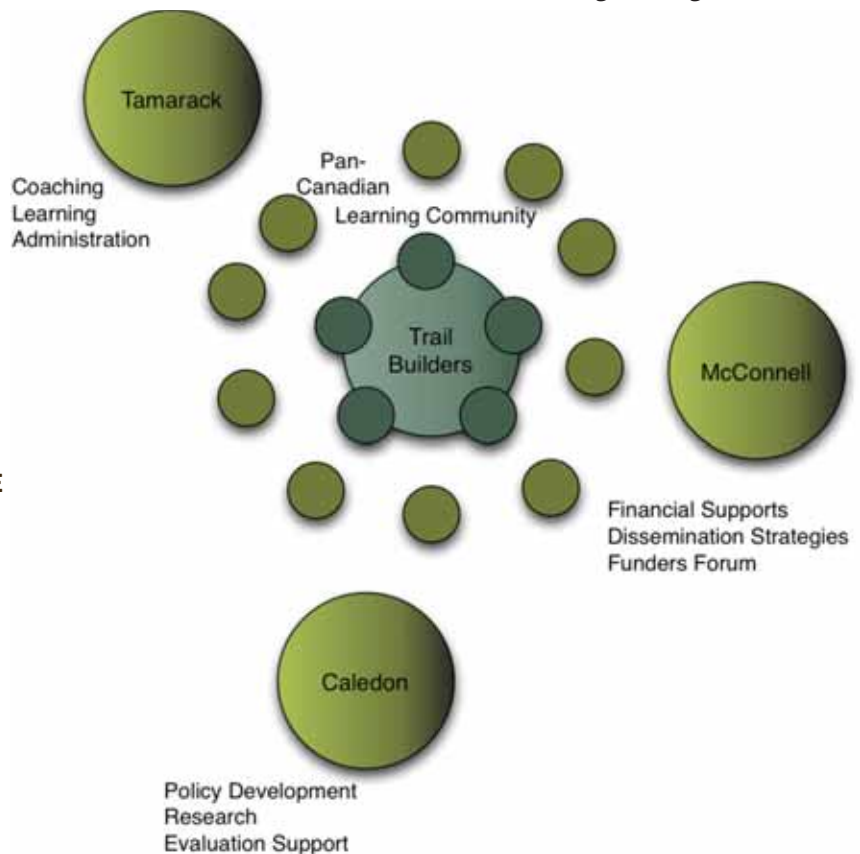
Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement

Tamarack was responsible for the overall leadership of the initiative, as well as for providing coaching to communities, managing the learning community, and administering the initiative. Tamarack also played an important role in disseminating information and results to other individuals and organizations interested in cross-sector collaborative work.

Each Trail Builder was provided with a primary coach who helped create and evolve the group’s overall approach to reducing poverty and addressed other issues related to the strategy and operations of the group.

The learning community used a wide array of resources and activities, including: an extensive website, a regular e-newsletter, monthly convener calls, tele-learning sessions with experts on various issues, communities of practice on topics of special interest to participants, aids for action designed specifically for Vibrant Communities and occasional face-to-face gatherings.

THE NATIONAL STRUCTURE



3 [UNDERSTANDING SUPPORTS]



The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation provided grants to Trail Builder communities, hosted periodic funders forums and shaped the initial dissemination strategy. Katharine Pearson and Tim Brodhead were directly engaged throughout Vibrant Communities, and were often very active in various learning activities.

The Caledon Institute

The Caledon Institute served as the think tank behind the project. Caledon's efforts can be divided into two main streams of work: a) helping to create an overall ecology for the work of the initiative and b) documenting the work of Trail Builders and identifying the policy implications of the Vibrant Communities experience.

In helping to build an overall ecology, Caledon carried out research on effective practices, helped to raise the profile of comprehensive community initiatives more generally and introduced language to describe its many characteristics. The documentation of Trail Builder efforts took many forms including "In from the Field," a summary and sketches collection that demonstrated how Trail Builders were applying the concepts of Vibrant Communities.

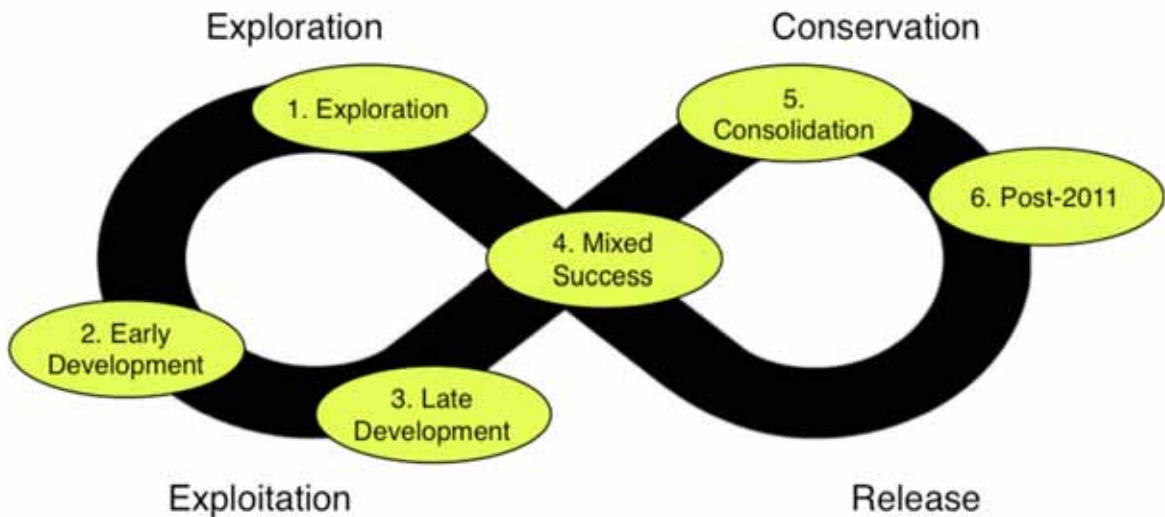


DIFFERENT STAGES

The national supports of Vibrant Communities went through several distinct phases. The panarchy cycle (sometimes referred to as the 'eco-cycle') offers a framework for summarizing these stages. Exploration, or reorganization, is a period of conceptualization and trial and error. As ideas crystallize, an entrepreneurial phase called exploitation turns invention into action. As more

is learned, resources and ideas are committed, allowing for increases in scale and improvements in efficiency. This is the conservation phase. As the context shifts, the existing structures face pressure to adapt, prompting the release phase. The diagram below and subsequent sections describe the Vibrant Communities supports in different phases.

THE PHASES OF VIBRANT COMMUNITIES



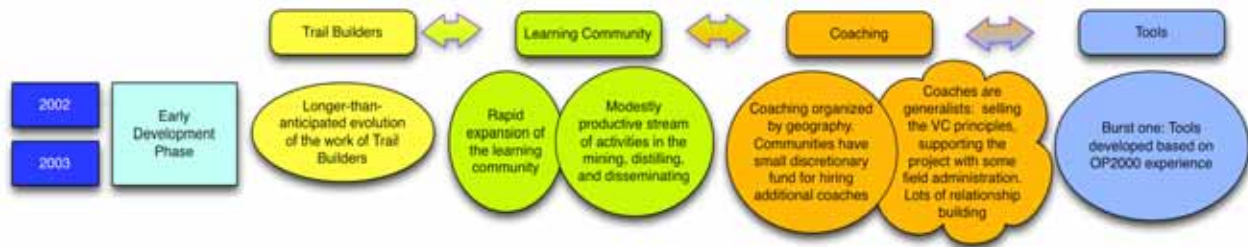
3 [UNDERSTANDING SUPPORTS]



Exploration Phase and Early Development

The initial challenge for Vibrant Communities was determining how to organize a national initiative to reduce poverty. Debates ensued about which key features should be included. There was a lot of agreement to focusing on a comprehensive approach and the asset orientation was seen as critically important. In the end, the partners agreed to focus on a number of distinct but inter-related elements, which eventually became known as the VC poverty puzzle.

Once the broad design was established, the national partners began moving forward in all streams of the project. This lasted from the summer of 2002 to approximately early 2004. It included (a) the rapid expansion of the learning community, (b) a longer-than-anticipated evolution of the work of Trail Builders, and (c) a modestly productive series of mining, distilling, and disseminating activities. This phase of the work was characterized by a lot of probes and small experiments, uncertainty and trial and error, with a broad sense of ownership among the local and national partners.



3 Much of the text in this section is a synthesis of the January 2012 internal document "History of Vibrant Communities Supports: An Outline" by Mark Cabaj.



Late Development Phase

The time frame for this period was from early 2004 to 2006. By this time, patterns in the learning community had stabilized and the mining and distillation work was proceeding on a rhythmic cycle that included strong participation in local learning calls, a steady flow of new tools and resources and active coaching relationships. The year 2005 marked a turning point in the initiative. Finally, after many years of local action, Trail Builders began to observe and document concrete changes in the lives of low-income households. Everyone took heart from Fair Fares, VC Calgary's affordable transportation success story. Niagara had helped facilitate the construction of a transitional housing facility known as Bethlehem Place. More success would come from Niagara's Job Bus project – a cross-

jurisdictional transportation, job training and employment initiative. Edmonton was developing Make Tax Time Pay – a tax filing project that helped low-income earners apply for up to ten benefits and subsidies. Montréal was beginning to develop a lot of partnership clubs that acted as idea incubators and strategy generators. Saint John had begun to see early successes in its neighborhood-focused efforts. Victoria's Employer Challenge was creating wide interest in human resources-related projects. The number of households affected by these activities was estimated at 12,000 (10,000 from Fair Fares alone); new initiatives were predicted to double that number. There was a sense of momentum.



3 [UNDERSTANDING SUPPORTS]



VC's trial period was now over. Had VC been sufficiently successful to warrant a second phase? Communities and sponsors attending a face-to-face meeting in Guelph in 2005 were very satisfied with the progress they had made in assisting families in their journey out of poverty. They felt it was definitely worth extending and expanding VC. Tamarack submitted a proposal to the McConnell Foundation in 2006 that included a plan to:

1. Expand the number of Trail Builders from six to 13, essentially opening up Trail Builder status to every member of the current learning community
2. Extend grant resources to include a renewal year (one-to-one matched up to \$100,000) followed by a 'sustainability phase' of three years (two-to-one matched funding up to \$50,000)
3. Expand the number of members in the learning community from 13 to all 34 census metropolitan areas in Canada
4. Deepen the Trail Builder activities associated with the mining, distilling and dissemination of results and learnings

The McConnell Foundation provided a lot of input to Tamarack in the development of the proposal. In the end, McConnell agreed to expand its support to (a) increase the number of Trail Builders funded and (b) extend the overall duration of the financial support.



New partners entered the picture. Impressed with the vitality of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community and the number and variety of Trail Builder poverty reduction initiatives, Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) agreed to provide

funding for learning supports. It also would help Vibrant Communities double the size of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community to all census metropolitan areas in the country.



Transition Period and Consolidation

The 2006 to 2008 time period was difficult. It was shaped by dynamic changes external to VC and within the partnership. A big external shift was that poverty was becoming a priority for Canadians, communities and governments. There were several polls published that confirmed that the public was interested in reducing poverty and believed that government should do something about it. At the convener level, all but one key contact in each city's local VC organization changed jobs. There was also turnover among the VC sponsors.

Despite these difficulties, Vibrant Communities was successful in expanding its list of Trail Builders and in deepening its mining and distillation work. It was more difficult to achieve the formal expansion of the learning community. The biggest challenge was developing a network that did not require funding in order to create community roundtables. There were also questions about organizing nationally or regionally. This brought Vibrant Communities to another crossroads in early 2008.

The national sponsors looked at the advantages and disadvantages of three options for the future of VC. They could: (a) continue to try to implement the plan from 2006, (b) spin off VC into an independent national entity that would operate much like a national association, and (c) wind up the initiative in 2011, focusing mostly on mining and disseminating its learnings. Such a move would put more resources in the hands of other poverty reduction innovators and early adopters. In the end, it was determined that the highest and best contribution VC Canada could make to the field was to choose option three. The focus from here on would be threefold. First, all eligible Trail Builders would be funded to the end of 2011 and given the support necessary to achieve good outcomes and to make a successful transition in the post-funding period. Second, VC would mine and document as much learning as possible. Third, it would expand mechanisms for encouraging broader learning outside of the network.

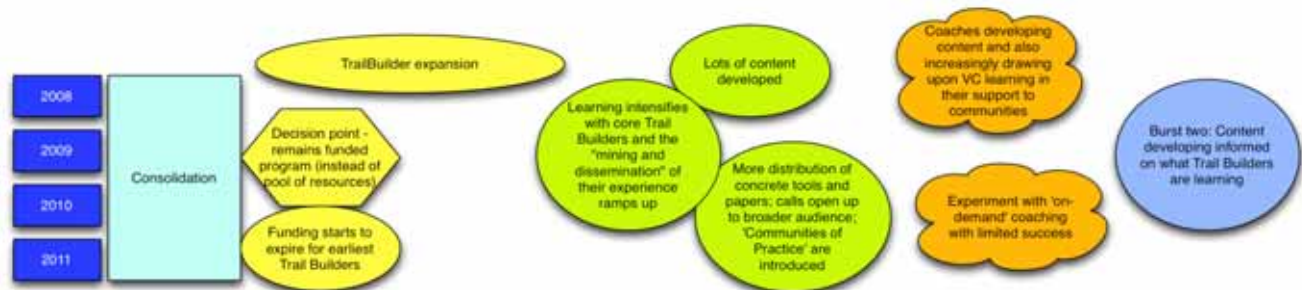
3 [UNDERSTANDING SUPPORTS]



Beyond 2011

In May 2010, a strategic dialogue on the future of poverty reduction in Canada was convened. There was a lot of interest in this discussion. One of its key conclusions was that Vibrant Communities Canada is a natural leader in Canada's ongoing efforts to eradicate poverty. In the fall of 2010, the decision was made to create Cities Reducing Poverty for which Tamarack would assume interim leadership. As the initial VC campaign was

wound up, a new network would concurrently be developed. Seeking to align poverty reduction strategies across Canada, Cities Reducing Poverty will develop a network of cities and regions that have active poverty reduction strategies and multi-sector roundtables.



4 See results here. http://tamarackcommunity.ca/Strategic_Dialogue.html



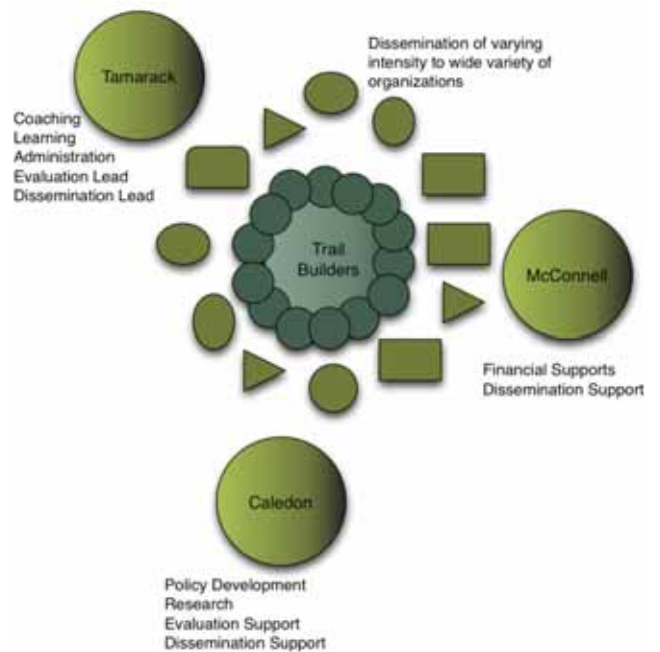
EVOLUTION OF ROLES

Common to any dynamic initiative, the roles of the three partners evolved over the ten years of Vibrant Communities. The number of Trail Builders expanded and the Pan-Canadian Learning Community transitioned into a much larger and more diverse set of individuals and organizations watching and learning from the Vibrant Communities experiment.

Tamarack assumed a lead role in several areas including formal leadership for administering external evaluations of the project and the administration of Trail Builder evaluation, the lead role for all dissemination strategies, and expanded use of web-based dissemination. To address the increase in the volume of grants and some turnover at the McConnell Foundation, Tamarack staff played a stronger role in the administration of grant payments. The individuals representing the national sponsors remained involved for the full ten years of Vibrant Communities. This contributed to consistency of delivery over the tenure of the initiative, but, as some of these principals have reflected, may also have contributed to a certain degree of stagnation in creative thinking.

Personal connections are key in any initiative. The shifts in VC roles illustrate the fact that personnel changes create vulnerabilities. Transitions in activity are often mirrored by transitions in personnel. It requires a special kind of energy to rebuild momentum in such periods. Start-up energies wane and must be replaced by an appetite for new roles and challenges.

The diagram below illustrates the structure of Vibrant Communities after the 2006 expansion.



THE EVOLVED NATIONAL STRUCTURE

4 [CASE EXAMPLES: HOW COMMUNITIES USED SUPPORTS]



What does the application of national supports on local poverty reduction efforts look like on the ground? The four mini-case studies below are illustrative of the different ways coaching, learning and tools played out in a real-life context.

- *The Power of New Ideas and Relationships in Saint-Michel* looks at the impact of coaching and face-to-face conferences in shaping the strategies and focus of this neighbourhood-focused initiative
- *Coaching Winnipeg on Staffing and Governance* examines the role of coaching and technical assistance in overcoming local challenges
- *The Job Bus: Cross Community Learning* highlights the ways that innovations from one community were picked up by other Trail Builders
- *Accessing Expertise: Edmonton's Living Wage Learning Initiative* shows how an emerging idea is enhanced by tapping into the experience of thought leaders

The Power of New Ideas and Relationships in Saint-Michel

Vibrant Communities arrived at a key time in the development of *Vivre Saint-Michel en Santé (VSMS)*.

After a decade of successful collaboration on neighbourhood projects that had improved residents' quality of life, the enthusiasm of the partners involved had begun to wane. Despite many new processes and structures, there had been no significant change in the underlying systems that create day-to-day conditions. Between 2000 and 2003, VSMS members began looking for new ideas to orient their work and directly improve living conditions in Saint-Michel. Their search led them to VC.

Vibrant Communities' focus on poverty reduction and its rigorous approach to evaluation helped breathe new life into VSMS. The ambitious idea of working toward the elimination of poverty

mobilized and re-energized community members. Visits from Vibrant Communities staff and sustained support from the Vibrant Communities coach were essential to the articulation of a theory of change. Creating this document helped cultivate strategic thinking about where the initiative was going and what participants wanted to build, rather than continuing to react to issues in isolation. The theory of change document survived successive three-year planning cycles and evolving priorities and changes in partnerships. It became a project touchstone, reminding all stakeholders that their efforts contributed to the shared goal of poverty elimination.

Developing the theory of change in a way that allowed VSMS staff and partners to 'own' the document was a lengthy and intensive process.



Meetings and discussions with the VC coach allowed VSMS staff to step back from their daily work and think strategically. The coach shared examples of other collaborative initiatives that could be instructive in Saint-Michel and helped prepare annual reflection sessions. He was integral to ensuring the approaches developed by VSMS staff were consistent with the VC vision.

Turning the idea of poverty elimination behind Vibrant Communities into a living neighbourhood initiative was a collective endeavour. For VSMS leaders, the face-to-face meetings were the most valuable part of the learning community. In-person meetings provided the time to learn and meet with other community representatives. At in-person convener meetings or Tamarack's yearly Communities Collaborating Institutes (CCI), there was time to explore new concepts like complexity and panarchy and consider how they could offer useful analytical perspectives for poverty reduction work in Saint-Michel.

Coaching Winnipeg on Staffing and Governance

From the initiative's outset, Vibrant Communities Trail Builders have wrestled with the governance structures and processes needed to support their work. The Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council (WPRC) is no exception. In June 2010, it called upon Vibrant Communities coaches to revisit the governance and staffing arrangements it developed when it was formed in 2007.

While multisector collaboratives are increasingly common, they are still a work in progress. They require participants to develop new kinds of infrastructure and ways of working. Convening

organizations must be dedicated to supporting community-wide collaboration. Governance arrangements must allow partners to share decision-making power. Staffing often combines the resources of multiple organizations. Making the shift to new structures and processes is not always easy.

Garry Loewen, the Vibrant Communities coach for Winnipeg, was well-positioned to help local leaders formulate the issues of concern and design a process for addressing them. Through Garry, Mark Cabaj, Executive Director of Vibrant Communities Canada, was invited to share VC's experience and insights about two questions:

- What staffing complement is needed to effectively support this sort of collaborative initiative?
- What should be the relationships among the WPRC itself, its host organization (the United Way of Winnipeg) and the initiative's staff?

In preparation for the session Mark was able to draw upon a wide range of resources. VC staff member Eric Leviten-Reid had already documented the organizational arrangements employed by VC Trail Builders (e.g., decision-making structures, staffing complements and budgets). He had explored the challenges associated with governance, particularly the need for clarity about the roles and responsibilities of various players.

4 [CASE EXAMPLES: HOW COMMUNITIES USED SUPPORTS]



Mark was also familiar with the experiences of other collaborations and relevant research undertaken by leading community change authorities (e.g., the US-based Aspen Roundtable on Community Change and Toronto's Centre for Social Innovation).

Mark gave the WPRC's Steering Committee an account of how staffing and governance issues impact communities' efforts to 'move the needle' on complex issues. He described various staffing arrangements and how each one helped shape the work of their initiatives. He highlighted particular challenges relevant to the Winnipeg situation, tying their situation to research and community experience.

During the session, two points became clear. First, there was consensus that additional full-time staffing was required in order for WPRC to move ahead its ambitious agenda. Second, there were markedly different perceptions among Steering Committee members about the roles WPRC partners should play in guiding and managing the initiative. In particular, there were questions about the United Way's role as host organization and its associated fiduciary responsibilities. The question of whether to add full-time staff accentuated the need for clearly-articulated governance arrangements.

Over the following year, WPRC proceeded to expand its staff complement from two half-time to three full-time positions and its members gradually shaped the governance processes that would best facilitate their work. The input provided by VC is credited with being instrumental in the development of these new arrangements.

Steering Committee members found the coaching session extremely useful. Harry Finnigan, (then) Managing Director of WPRC, said: "As a coaching intervention I would give the session a five out of five. It provided the Steering Committee with the examples and insights its members needed to make informed choices about the challenging issues they were facing."

The Job Bus: Cross Community Learning

Access to transportation is a common problem facing people on low incomes. Not surprisingly, a number of VC Trail Builders made this issue a focus of concern. Innovative efforts in one community inspired and supported action in others.

In Niagara Region, lack of intermunicipal transportation was a longstanding concern. In this sprawling region of 1,899 square kilometers and 12 municipalities, inadequate regional transit meant that unemployed workers were unable to access available jobs and employers were unable to secure the workers they required. In Niagara's burgeoning tourism sector, the problem was so acute that some hotel operators had begun to bring in foreign workers, despite the many local residents searching for employment.

Through the combined efforts of many players – local hotel operators, the Niagara Tourism Human Resource Council, the Region of Niagara's Department of Community Services and local employment agencies – an initiative was developed that combined customized training, intermunicipal transportation and well-paying jobs. Opportunities



Niagara, a collaborative formed to reduce poverty throughout the Region, also played an integral role in helping to establish, operate and expand an initiative known as the "Job Bus." Over the course of a little more than three years, the initiative assisted hundreds of local residents to secure employment. By demonstrating the desirable outcomes that could be achieved, it also helped re-ignite government efforts to improve intermunicipal transportation.

During one of Vibrant Communities' tele-learning calls, representatives from Vibrant Communities Edmonton (VCE) learned about the Niagara initiative. They quickly saw that this type of project might also work in their city. New employment opportunities were popping up in industrial parks on the fringes of Edmonton, but these areas received only limited public transit services. Job seekers found it difficult to reach these outlying areas; employers struggled to attract and retain workers.

In order to take learn more about the Job Bus, VCE invited Peter Papp, Executive Director of Opportunities Niagara, to join them for one of their leadership team meetings. Based on Peter's presentation and later materials that described the mechanics of developing such an initiative, VCE began organizing its own job bus. Members met with a number of businesses concerned with employee transportation, surveyed workers about their transportation needs and explored ways to provide adequate transportation to existing and future workers. Through its leadership team, VCE made links with Edmonton Transit representatives who began looking for ways to better meet the needs of employers and prospective employees.

In Calgary, the Job Bus example contributed to the work of Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) in a somewhat different way. By showing what a collaborative initiative could accomplish, the Niagara example gave VCC the credibility it needed to win partners in the business community. As former VCC Executive Director Ramona Johnston relates: "I thought the [Job Bus] concept was fabulous in its simplicity, and I described it to many audiences over the years. I recall using it to engage one large group of Calgary business representatives including the Calgary Zoo, Calgary Flames and Calaway Park, who had been brought together by the Alberta government in the hopes they could group problem-solve their labour shortage issues. I think they initially questioned why Vibrant Calgary had been brought to the table, but the story of the Niagara bus initiative really engaged them and opened the doors to further communication regarding support for our Fair Fares [affordable transit pass] initiative."

Representatives from Calaway Park (20 minutes west of Calgary), were particularly interested in a 'job bus' service. Because the Calgary Flames and the Calgary Zoo were both located in the city with good access to public transit, they were more interested in supporting Fair Fares, the affordable bus pass effort. Both agreed to promote it among their staff and to use it as part of their recruitment efforts. Such examples helped Fair Fares make its case to the City. Ultimately, a bus pass program was established and funded by the City. In 2008, Calgary Transit reported that of the 35,000 local residents eligible for the pass, approximately 10,000 had applied to the program and 5,000 people were purchasing a pass each month.

4 [CASE EXAMPLES: HOW COMMUNITIES USED SUPPORTS]



Accessing Expertise: Edmonton's Living Wage Learning Initiative

As the former Executive Director of the Edmonton Social Planning Council and an experienced community services consultant, Peter Faid is no stranger to community work. He credits Vibrant Communities for fostering learning that strengthens local action.

As one of the founding members of Vibrant Communities Edmonton, Peter remembers the initiative's early work to articulate its 'theory of change.' With support from evaluation consultants engaged by Vibrant Communities, local participants spent three long days figuring out how to reduce poverty in Edmonton. "Do I really have the time to spend doing this?" Peter asked himself. "Is it worth it?" Nearly eight years later, his answer is a resounding "yes." "It is remarkable," he says, "how many times the group referred back to its theory of change to jog its thinking about what it should be doing and how." VCE held annual reflection sessions to review its theory of change to see if it was still on target and to determine whether its strategies continued to be relevant and appropriate. Even when the initiative concluded that it needed to shift emphasis from a programmatic focus to a "bigger and bolder" approach, the basic elements of its theory of change continued to be seen as strong and true. The document provided a steady reference point in the midst of change.

In those early days, what emerged was a strong focus on the needs of the working poor, a demographic that was getting larger in Edmonton and in cities across Canada. VCE's research showed that many of the available jobs in Edmonton paid

low wages. In 2006, two of the largest employers in the city – the retail sector and the accommodation and food sector – each had notably high levels of minimum wage jobs, 14.1 percent and 30.2 percent respectively. Moreover, the needs of the working poor were largely going unaddressed by existing programs and services.

In response, VCE adopted a three-pronged strategy developed by the US-based Annie E. Casey Foundation. Through 'family economic supports,' 'workforce development' and 'community investment,' it set out to enhance 'family economic success' in Edmonton, especially for people working for low wages.

Along with other Vibrant Communities groups, VCE was encouraged to develop a local learning plan to help instill a culture of learning among local participants and to contribute to VC's national learning agenda. Edmonton's learning plan expressed an interest in 'Living Wage' – a set of ideas and strategies for ensuring that employees are paid fair and adequate wages.

Peter Faid recalls the Living Wage Learning Initiative as a great example of the learning opportunities made available through Vibrant Communities. In his experience, people in the community sector are usually so busy with their day-to-day work that they rarely have a chance to step back and learn about new initiatives being pursued elsewhere. Through VC's Living Wage Learning Initiative, Peter reflects: "We were talking to the three or four people in North America who had done a lot of work on the Living Wage. Some had written books about the issue, and we could ask them questions. It was unbelievably great!"



Over the course of four tele-learning events, Peter and several other members of VCE learned about the principles behind the Living Wage movement and the various ways that particular campaigns had been pursued in communities throughout North America. Following the calls, they debated among themselves the pros and cons of different approaches and their appropriateness to Edmonton.

In the end, the sessions gave VCE members the understanding and confidence they needed to bring the Living Wage issue to Edmonton City Council. At a committee meeting involving nearly all Council members, VCE described the challenges faced by people earning low incomes, defined what would constitute a Living Wage in Edmonton and urged the City to take two major actions. First, Council could pursue a legislative as opposed to a voluntary approach to advancing adequate wages. This would mean passing regulations requiring that all City employees and all firms contracted to do work for the City be paid a Living Wage. Second, VCE urged the City to ensure that funding provided to human service and community organizations be sufficient for those organizations to meet the Living Wage standard for their employees.

Although the City of Edmonton did not take up its recommendations, VCE's presentation set a marker for future efforts. According to Peter Faid, the Living Wage issue continues to "bubble up" in local poverty reduction discussions. He credits the Living Wage Learning Initiative for providing the impetus and insights that put the issue on the table in Edmonton.

5 [THE USE AND VALUE OF SUPPORTS]



Vibrant Communities provided a variety of ways to link members of the Learning Community and encourage them to support and learn from each other.

- Face-to-face events
- Coaching
- Convener Calls
- Website
- Tele-Learning

FACE-TO-FACE EVENTS

VC staff and community partners developed three broad types of face-to-face learning events. While the specific objectives of each event varied, they all focused on opportunities for networking, sharing experiences and exploring common challenges and opportunities. These included:

- *Pan-Canadian VC Forum.* Trail Builder representatives, VC sponsors and selected guests met periodically to exchange ideas, explore select themes related to their work in more depth (e.g., Living Wage Community of Practice) and make decisions about the design and operations of the Vibrant Communities initiative. VC sponsors and Trail Builders co-designed the event while VC sponsors made resources available for Trail Builder travel costs.
- *Regional/National Forums* provided Trail Builders, communities and regional intermediaries (e.g., a local United Way) the same opportunities as Pan Canadian VC Forums, but with a special emphasis on shared challenges and opportunities at a regional level (e.g., in May 2008, representatives from

20 Ontario communities came together to strengthen poverty reduction efforts in that province). Regional/National forums took place when Trail Builders within a region expressed a strong interest in having such an event and had mobilized other regional intermediaries to support the work of co-convening and funding the event. Vibrant Communities sponsors typically participated in the event design and often contributed logistical and funding support for the event.

- *“Know How” Institutes.* Trail Builders were invited to participate in various Tamarack-coordinated training institutes that explored different aspects of working collaboratively on complex issues such as poverty, evaluation and collaborative governance. The biggest Institute continues (in the post-VC period) to be an annual week-long Communities Collaborating Institute. In the 2002-2011 period, approximately 25% of the roughly 100 attendees were Vibrant Communities members who receive a subsidy to attend. (For more information on the Institute, see: <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/cci.html>)



Trail Builder Reported Use of Face-to-Face Conferences				
I attended a face-to-face conference put on by Tamarack	Not at all	Once	Twice	More than twice
	27%	35%	21%	17%

These events were often fully subscribed. They provided the opportunity to more deeply explore ideas and issues, and were

foundational in building relationships and networks across communities.

Trail Builder's perceived value of face-to-face conferences	Not at all useful	A bit useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
	3%	6%	16%	74%

Trail Builders highly valued the face-to-face events. The learning that was begun during these sessions was reinforced by other supports. They resulted in an expanded

awareness of poverty reduction strategies, were instrumental in articulating an aspiration and framework for change, and helped communities to constructively reframe poverty issues.

5 [THE USE AND VALUE OF SUPPORTS]



WEBSITE

The power of the World Wide Web was unknown when Vibrant Communities sponsors began discussing the project in 2001. The two emerged together over the decade of Vibrant Communities activity and the Internet and electronic communications became a major mechanism for sharing information and connecting people.

Vibrant Communities sponsors experimented a great deal with how to make the website, www.vibrantcommunities.ca, a useful platform for learning and exchange. As web technology evolved, so did the capability of the Vibrant Communities site: audio downloads were made available, the site became more interactive, and the ability to monitor site user activity became more sophisticated.

The reach of the website grew rapidly. By 2006 there were nearly 50,000 unique visitors per year, a number that remained relatively constant over the next five years of Vibrant Communities operations. However, the volume of downloads increased dramatically over time, reflecting the increasingly diverse ways of accessing an ever-growing volume of resources. In 2006, the most downloaded item was downloaded just over 2000 times; by 2010 the top download was downloaded more than 16,000 times. Podcast downloads grew from 731 in 2006 to more than 25,000 in 2010. In 2010 alone, more than 890,000 resources were downloaded from the Tamarack website.



Trail Builder Reported Use of Website				
I used the Tamarack website to find information	Not at all	Once or twice	Several times a year	Monthly or more
		14%	20%	52%

The website is seen by many as a portal to high-quality resources. Some are produced by Tamarack and Caledon, others by Trail Builder communities. Still others are sourced from leading thinkers on poverty reduction and community engagement. In several cases, these helped to move local initiatives forward, and were often accessed in

combination with other learning activities (e.g., tele-learnings). Many Trail Builders used the papers and resources to lend weight to the legitimacy of their approaches, and to bring local partners up to speed on the complexities of poverty reduction and comprehensive community initiatives.

Trail Builder's perceived value of website	Not at all useful	A bit useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
		5%	18%	31%

As with any web-based technology, users felt there was room for improvement. While approximately two-thirds of the Trail-Builders reported that they used the site at least several times per year, several

commented that though the content was useful, they found the navigation of the site difficult – a challenge that Tamarack staff have worked continuously to address.

5 [THE USE AND VALUE OF SUPPORTS]



ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTERS (ENGAGE! AND EUNOIA)

In order to provide a regular and easy-to-access update on the activities and learnings of Vibrant Communities – and community building in general – Tamarack offered two electronic newsletters:

- Eunoia (Greek for “beautiful thinking”) was produced to share resources and stories of community building in general. Tamarack discontinued this newsletter in 2008 with the emergence of a new, more comprehensive, version of the Engage newsletter.
- Engage – a bi-weekly (now monthly) newsletter that highlighted activities and learnings in Vibrant Communities and key themes of community engagement: http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2_engage.html

The pattern of usage of the newsletters had a similar usage pattern of use for the VC website: The number of subscribers grew from approximately 500 e-mail bulletin subscribers in 2003 to more than 7000 subscribers to the Engage and Eunoia newsletters.

Trail Builder Reported Use of Newsletters				
I have read Engage or Eunoia	Not at all	Once or twice	Several times a year	Monthly or more
		23%	13%	46%



The levels stayed roughly the same from 2006 onward, although approximately 5-10% of the subscribers turn over from year to year. ⁵

Trail Builder's perceived value of newsletters	Not at all useful	A bit useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
	7%	14%	45%	35%

The newsletters were as much a tool to disseminate Tamarack learnings to people outside the network as they were a support to Trail Builder communities. They provided a

highly scalable platform for sharing information among communities, and for exposing those observing the VC experiment to ideas and lessons emerging from the work.

⁵ Note that the number of subscribers drops to ~6300 in 2008 after the database is cleaned up and duplications are removed. In 2011 it is nearing the 7000 mark again

5 [THE USE AND VALUE OF SUPPORTS]



COACHING

The Vibrant Communities approach to coaching evolved over the years. By 2006, the model included providing Trail Builders with regionally-based coaches (e.g., Atlantic Canada, British Columbia). Coaches were able to offer up to 7 days of coaching per year and were provided funds to cover the costs of one on-site, face-to-face visit. Coaching was intended to

be responsive to the needs of the community and was limited only by the following two restrictions: (a) coaching had to include, at a minimum, a focus on creating and periodically reflecting on the group's framework for change; and (b) coaching could not focus on technical work that could be accomplished by local staff or consultants.

Trail Builder Reported Use of Coaching				
I worked directly with the VC coach assigned to our community	Not at all	Once or twice	Several times a year	Monthly or more
	33%	17%	35%	15%

There was consistent use of coaching by most Trail Builder communities. This tended to include at least one site visit per year; more when there were pressing issues. In cases where the coach lived closer to the Trail Builder community, more visits tended to occur. There were some exceptions to this frequency of use. This was usually driven by a poor fit between the style of the coach and

local community and/or when turnover in local leadership meant that coaches and Trail Builder representatives had to reconnect and rebuild a coaching relationship. Nonetheless, Trail Builder representatives consistently rated coaching as one of the most useful supports during external and internal evaluations.



Trail Builder's perceived value of coaching	Not at all useful	A bit useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
	6%	8%	21%	65%

Coaching support helped identify patterns and trends in the local work, and helped local partners make collective sense of the poverty picture in their community. Achieving a high level of clarity was dependent upon having access to a coach who was able to effectively communicate their experience and familiarity with Vibrant Communities overall. This dynamic is best summarized by one of the Trail Builder conveners: "As one of the founding members of [our local roundtable], approximately half of my full-time job was dedicated to building the infrastructure and processes to bring [the local

Vibrant Communities effort] alive. The support that we received from our coach was invaluable. With daily issues cropping up, our one-on-one sessions made the difference between success and failure. We brought real-life challenges to him and he was able to assist us in problem solving each of them, or rather, providing us with options as to how we could proceed. Because the issues were highly complex and situation-specific, we required a coach who was very familiar with the Vibrant Communities initiative."

5 [THE USE AND VALUE OF SUPPORTS]



TELE-LEARNING

The demand by Vibrant Communities partners to keep in touch between face-to-face meetings and the emergence of cost-effective tele-conference services created an opportunity to experiment with tele-learning as methodology for learning and networking.

Like other supports, Vibrant Communities staff and communities experimented with a variety of different formats for tele-learning, particularly in the first one-half of the project. This included, among others, (a) highly structured sessions where trainers introduced very specific practices (e.g. how to complete a poverty matrix) to a targeted group of users; (b) large scale sessions where people would gather in small groups to hear a speaker (e.g. Sherri Torjman's provocative paper on how to build a vibrant community) and then stay behind to discuss the implications for their local work and then have an opportunity to participate in on-line discussions with the speaker for the next two weeks; and (c) panel discussions where Vibrant Communities staff would interview thought leaders, with questions and answers, much like a radio interview.

Approximately mid-way through the 10 year initiative, Vibrant Communities sponsored settled on a fairly consistent format: a 60 minute conference call where a Vibrant Communities coach would interview thought leaders on a particular idea, practice or case study for 40 minutes, and then facilitate 20 minutes of questions and answers from people on the line. After the call, listeners were supplied with a tele-learning webpage with links to related resources and an edited podcast of the interview.

By 2010 there were approximately a dozen tele-learning sessions a year focused just on Vibrant Communities themes and a similar number on larger issues related to community building. There were between 30 and 127 lines per tele-learning call, with an average of 63 lines per call. Lines often gave access to multiple participants – two to 15 people might meet at a local organization or convener's office to listen to the call and discuss the implications for their local work once the session was over.



Trail Builder Reported Use of Tele-Learning				
I participated in tele-learning calls	Not at all	Once or twice	Several times a year	Monthly or more
	19%	39%	29%	13%

Communities of Practice were a next generation version of the tele-learning seminars. In these, a diverse and ever-changing group of interested practitioners would engage around a particular theme (e.g., evaluation) over a period of time.

There were a number of different Communities of Practice over the life of Vibrant Communities, including: Engaging Business, Living Wage, Evaluation, Government Policy, Funding Community Impact and Raising Public Awareness.

Trail Builder's perceived value of tele-learning	Not at all useful	A bit useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
	10%	17%	41%	32%

The experience with tele-learning was mixed. This is likely a function of learning style. For some, it provided an initial exposure to new material that could be pursued independently in more depth. For others, a more visual and hands-on

engagement with the material was desired. In either case, tele-learning calls provided Trail Builders with a regular, cost-effective, easy-to-use technique to come together quickly to explore a new idea, resource or success story.

5 [THE USE AND VALUE OF SUPPORTS]



CONVENER CALLS

Representatives from all Trail Builder communities participated in bi-monthly teleconference sessions to identify and discussed issues of common interest and opportunities for just-in-time learning (e.g. structuring a leadership roundtable).

Trail Builder's perceived value of convener calls	Not at all useful	A bit useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful
	10%	18%	29%	43%

The use of convener calls was mixed throughout VC. There were clear uses – e.g., keeping in touch with Trail Builder communities and responding to specific learning requests – however, participation was undercut by turnover and the reluctance of community representatives to take a lead role in these interactions. Often, the convener calls served more administrative purposes than learning purposes. Sometimes Trail Builders felt they were participating in convener calls out of obligation.



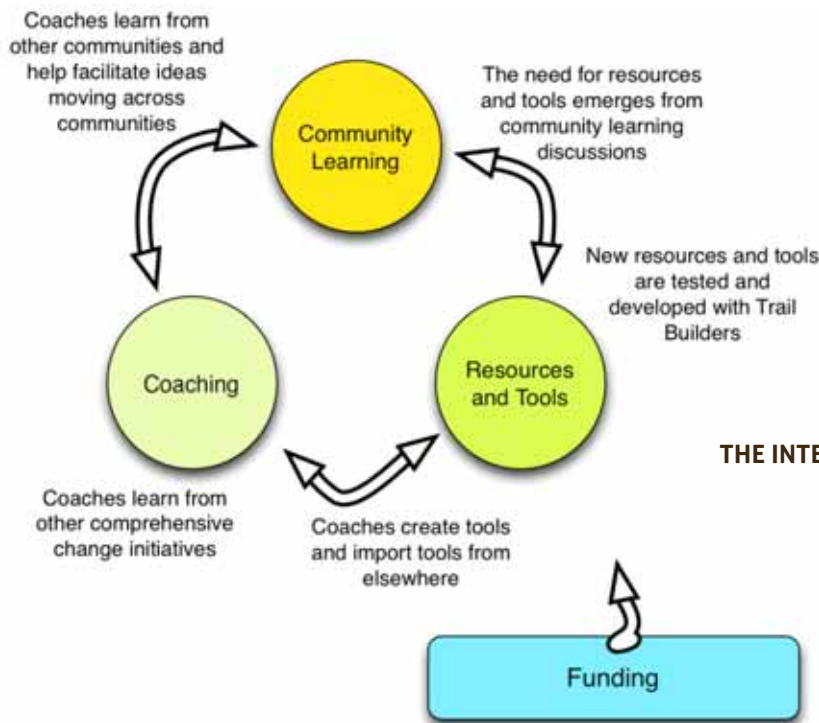
OVERALL VALUE AND BENEFITS OF THE SUPPORTS

Trail Builders reported that supports were important to their local poverty reduction efforts. More than half (51%) said that supports were very important, and almost as many (38%) said that they were moderately important.

With an initiative like Vibrant Communities – one that is developmental in nature and has an action-research/learning orientation – a full suite of supports is necessary. The risk in this analysis is that

we disaggregate supports into discrete elements, and presume an effect based on what a particular support can offer. The supports ultimately need to be seen as a comprehensive package.

The emphasis on certain supports will vary depending on the stage at which a community is operating – i.e., their approach and where they are at in their poverty reduction efforts. Value is derived from multiple sources within the range of supports.



THE INTER-CONNECTEDNESS OF SUPPORTS

5 [THE USE AND VALUE OF SUPPORTS]



As community dialogues around poverty gained momentum, supports helped consolidate local awareness and knowledge around poverty reduction. Supports ultimately contributed to the emergence of constructive conversations about poverty. The following outcomes reflect the collective value of the supports:

- VC's programmatic/systems level outcomes reflected new political channels that otherwise might not have existed
- Collaborative and community-based learning translated into valuable strategies (e.g., Living Wage, Affordability Index) across multiple communities
- Learning supports supplied a shared language that afforded local participants a common base for communication; when coupled with financial incentives, this common base provided the foundation for a new learning orientation
- VC supports invigorated local processes by injecting energy and inspiration; the combination of shared communication, learning orientation and sense of renewal nourished a new community dialogue
- Being part of a national network is more than shared learning. The supports provided an ongoing reinforcement of VC principles and contributed to a shared identity that brought broader recognition/legitimacy to the overall approach
- Supports equipped local conveners with tools for evaluation and provided their roundtables with a new type of knowledge and evidence with which to work

Trail Builders verified the following benefits of supports. The strongest agreement was with the following:

- Access to another community's learning about a specific challenge or issue
- Learning about new program or policy ideas that had been implemented in another community
- Providing a theoretical basis for some of the work
- Learning about a tool or method that was directly applicable to the work

Almost as strong was the identification with the following:

- Personal motivation to sustain the poverty reduction effort
- The ability to attract and convene additional partners locally
- Increased local legitimacy

Trail Builders also identified positively with the community benefit of "Resolution of a local issue or concern," but in a more moderate way when compared to the benefits noted above.

When asked how they would recommend allocating resources towards supports, Trail Builders identified funding as the most desirable. The remaining responses were roughly balanced among coaching, cross-community connection and supports, and on-line learning resources, tools and publications.



Trail Builder Recommendations on How to Allocate Overall Resources Towards the Different Kinds of Supports



Shared Language and Information Exchange

An open environment for communication was established in order to create trustful relationships among learners. A shared language afforded local participants a common base for communication and, when coupled with financial incentives, this common base provided the foundation for a new learning orientation.

In support-facilitated exchanges such as tele-learning calls or face-to-face conferences, Vibrant Communities acted as a clearing house for information and ideas. Participants were not only able to access good ideas, they also got a sense of their own city's uniqueness. There was a quality of self-assessment – communities came to understand their strengths and weaknesses and how they would adapt new ideas to their own circumstances.

By fostering a new learning orientation, VC equipped what had been a poorly understood sector with an important new asset. The learning community built a common presence – socially and intellectually – across communities. A new group of people were meeting through different forums, reading similar materials and engaging in

the exploration of similar concepts. The supports helped surface community champions – such people are critical to advancing poverty reduction work and the Vibrant Communities effort locally.

Peer-to-Peer Learning

Without VC's learning supports, peer-to-peer learning would not have occurred. Dr. Josh Evans reflected the following after completing his research: "Conveners, roundtables, getting practical support from other cities, face-to-face meetings, information and resources from tele-learning....all of this was important. We can observe the effects of that learning in a number of ways: new instances of lesson drawing, looking at successes and failures, and the value added with regard to the interpersonal. You can disseminate lessons via reports, but there were a number of examples where the lesson drawing evolved over time because of an established relationship. This was more of a professional relationship, a different type of social presence that you would not get via a distant connection and document dissemination."

5 [THE USE AND VALUE OF SUPPORTS]



WHAT IS DIFFERENT BECAUSE OF SUPPORTS?

As stated in the introduction to this report, understanding the supports and learning are important because the outcomes are important. Trail Builders were asked to reflect on how their work would have unfolded had they not been connected to the learning supports. They reported several ways in which the supports influenced both their approach and the overall progress of their community's efforts. The following impacts were noted:

- The role of the organization and the nature of its relationship to the community would have been different. For example, in the Trail Builder community of Saint-Michel: "Significantly, although this shift is a gradual process and is still under way, VSMS moved from acting as a consultative/information-sharing body to becoming a real partnership of organizations with a higher level of shared commitment and goals. Identifying project leads that agree to take on initiatives on behalf of the group and report back to the group is an important evolution in the collaborative culture."
- Some communities would not have had the same overall framing and strategy for their poverty reduction work: "VC supports helped us become more focused and targeted in our poverty reduction strategies." Said another: "I do not think we would have understood the complexity of poverty," and: "We would have been program-driven, less integrated, less visible and had less community engagement."
- Several communities reported that the supports enhanced their motivation: "Information and suggestions from the VC representatives helped our group develop a commitment and focus for our work."
- Shared learning: "Some projects would not have happened if we had not had the ideas from other communities or the funding to get them going, such as the community housing agency or the neighbourhood bikes project – we often came back from meetings with ideas for projects." Another observed: "[We] definitely would lose the ability to compare initiatives and their efficacy if Tamarack was not in the picture. In turn, that would have affected our decision making and we would have repeated the trial and error methods of other cities."



In terms of overall progress, Trail builders indicated that the supports enabled an accelerated pace for their work: "We were able to 'get up to speed' quicker by learning from our colleagues and their initiatives," and: "With the national-level support, the timeline for progress would have been longer since we'd have spent more time establishing credibility." Some even speculated that the funding and the built capacity enabled an effort that would not otherwise have happened: "It may not have actually been able to happen without the funding – due to the feeling of isolation in conducting efforts and a lack of confidence in the validity of our approach without having other examples and learning readily available."

It was also felt that VC and its supports provided an expanded profile. "Being linked to a national movement contributed to the profile of poverty reduction in our community and also was influential at the provincial level" (in this case, contributing to the establishment of a provincial poverty reduction strategy that used VC-type approaches). Several specific poverty reduction initiatives would not have otherwise occurred. Said one spokesperson: "A number of initiatives that make a difference would not have been launched." Another observed: "Hot topic issues like the Living Wage would never have been addressed. Policy challenges in many provincial and municipal areas would not have been brought to the table within our city."

Some Trail Builders were unsure if VC supports impacted progress, or reflected that they thought the effects were limited: "Not much. It helped mostly with evaluation," "I am not sure, as our progress has been stop-and-go, largely due to changes in staffing and organizational structure," and: "Unfortunately, for the time I was involved, I didn't see much progress. I think the VC supports were very informative and helpful, but they were not used as effectively as they should have been."

6 [WHAT WORKS WHEN, FOR WHOM]



WHEN WERE THE SUPPORTS VALUABLE?

Funding contributed to initiating the work of VC Trail Builders and sustaining their efforts over a multi-year period. The funding was particularly vital as work got under way, but was needed throughout the action-learning experiment in order to build community capacity and maintain the focus on a learning agenda.

In some Trail Builder communities, coaches provided support for initial relationship building and 'selling' the VC concept when conveners were initiating VC efforts in their communities. Coaching was valuable in helping a community respond to a particular challenge or address a stumbling block. For example, in Winnipeg the local issues of concern included governance and role clarity with the core organizations. VC coaches provided the right information at the right time. In the months that followed the coaching session, the Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council proceeded to expand its staff from two half-time positions to three full-time positions. Its members also clarified the roles and responsibilities of the Council and the United Way, and the reporting responsibilities of the initiative's staff. In due course, WPRC again altered its governance arrangements. However, it did so with an enhanced awareness of the challenges and opportunities involved.

The Winnipeg example illustrates how this community was able to access high-quality support and advice that drew upon lessons and insights from the overall VC experience: "Without VC supports [the progress made in Winnipeg] would be sporadic and less likely to be sustainable

because of the uncertainty that any work could be accomplished without the funding support. It would not have been as directed or outcome focused. It was important to have the national VC principles guiding the local initiative."

The Communities of Practice were advantageous later in VC's life cycle. They provided a way for groups of people to explore emerging ideas and areas of interest. They could consider taking a 'deeper dive' into poverty reduction strategies or comprehensive community approaches. For example, the the Living Wage Community of Practice stimulated Living Wage activity in Hamilton and in Edmonton. The discussions were a way to access knowledge about a critical issue that was unaddressed by existing programs and services. In the case of Edmonton, it gave VCE members the understanding and confidence they needed to bring the Living Wage issue to Edmonton City Council.

Cross community-relationships were cultivated over time using multiple means of interaction. The knowledge base was expanding as were the social connections among the community representatives and the members of Vibrant Communities staff. Often, initial exposure to a concept would occur



through the various means of interactions and dissemination, and then, as interest in an idea coalesced within a community, representatives would seek more 'just-in-time'/on-demand support from their peers, their coach and the available resource material.

In the Job Bus example, representatives from Vibrant Communities Edmonton learned about the Niagara initiative through Vibrant Communities' tele-learning calls. On demand and just-in-time programs do not emerge on their own – in VC, they often resulted from cross-community connection and relationship. Coaches did a lot to facilitate this kind of interaction in the early years of the initiative. Over time, communities continued a practice that had been modeled for them.

For at least one community, VC publications and "summary" resources (newsletter, website, reports) were judged the most valuable or useful supports. The spokesperson from this convening group felt that because their community had joined VC while in a more mature phase (they possessed all the necessary buy-in and experience) – these resources allowed them to access learning more efficiently. They knew more about what they wanted and what they were looking for.

The adoption of VC principles would not have happened without the core funding support from the The J. W. McConnell Family Foundation. Funding contributed to the intentionality of learning across the initiative; it made learning a primary objective, rather than an ad hoc, now-and-then component.

Supports became increasingly valuable and sophisticated over time. In the case of Winnipeg, the community gained insights about convening that had emerged over the course of Vibrant Communities' ten years of operation. When VC was launched in 2002, the only convening model it had to offer was the one used by OP2000. Over time, about half a dozen different convening arrangements were experimented with by different Trail Builder communities. Lessons from these experiments were articulated and coaches encountered these different models in their work. The result: more strategic advice for Winnipeg. As VC coach Garry Loewen notes: "The quality of our supports improved over time. A lot of the time, Trail Builders were asking for support and advice on implementation, something that was difficult for VC coaches to provide in the early days."

There was a similar evolution with the work on Living Wage, as illustrated in the Edmonton mini-case example. At the start of Vibrant Communities, Living Wage lessons from OP2000 were presented as "10 things your company can do to reduce poverty." In time, the understanding of this issue matured and deepened. A Living Wage series emerged that provided access to experts and discussions of emerging strategies; this work later evolved into a Living Wage Community of Practice.

6 [WHAT WORKS WHEN, FOR WHOM]



DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES AND DIFFERENT PATTERNS OF USE

The use and emphasis of national supports by Trail Builder communities also varied. Using the five communities that were part of the in-depth case interviews, we can observe the variations and get some insight into the factors that contribute to these differences.

Tele-learning use was roughly even across each of the communities. Convener call participation varied, but this is likely a function of when communities started as a Trail Builder; earlier Trail Builders participated more.

The most noticeable difference was in the use of coaching. Coaching use was highest for Saint-Michel and was also fairly high for Edmonton and Winnipeg. It was comparatively lower for Hamilton and Victoria. Participation in face-to-face conferences was highest for Saint-Michel, fairly high for Edmonton and Hamilton, and comparatively less for Victoria and Winnipeg.

Another key variable was the degree to which there was a broader group of community partners accessing the various supports. In the case of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, there was a widespread and proactive distribution of resources and invitations to learning activities within the Roundtable's local networks. This example contrasts with Edmonton where the participation and expectations for participation centered around a core group of staff and partners.



HOW DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES VALUED SUPPORTS DIFFERENTLY

Use is related to how things are valued. The in-depth interviews with five of the Trail Builder communities demonstrated various patterns of use:

- Saint-Michel expressly noted the value of coaching and face-to-face conferences. Winnipeg was also a regular user of the coaching support, but perhaps for a different reason than Saint-Michel. Saint-Michel's use was more strategic: Coaching was used to shift the organization's overall orientation and develop and implement a new theory of change. Winnipeg's use of coaching emphasized support and assistance in evaluation and collaborative governance. For Winnipeg, coaching was used in specific areas, such as engaging business.
- Hamilton was very engaged in peer learning. Compared with the cities profiled in the mini-case studies, Hamilton made far more references to what other cities were doing, regularly scanning other VC communities and learning from their successes and failures.
- Hamilton's focus on systemic change also led its members to look closely at the Caledon Institute's work on policy dialogue and policy learning circles.
- Hamilton and Victoria were well under way with their poverty reduction work before they joined VC as Trail Builders. They had less need for coaching as a result.
- Hamilton deemed funding to be of less value than did other communities; Victoria valued it much more. Victoria always struggled to secure financial resources, while Hamilton was well resourced from the start.
- Saint-Michel had a harder time learning from other communities' VC experiences, largely due to language differences. Vibrant Communities inspired Saint-Michel representatives to try learning from others in Québec, which led them to visit Trois-Rivières and four or five neighbourhoods in Montréal that had launched successful poverty reduction initiatives.
- Early in VC, Edmonton used the coaching support to assist in issues of governance. They used tele-learning to gather new ideas for possible areas of work. Towards the end of VC, Edmonton began shifting its framework for change to a systems level activity. At this point, they made greater use of their VC relationships, reaching out to other communities to seek ideas and advice on structure and overall sustainability.

6 [WHAT WORKS WHEN, FOR WHOM]



DIFFERENT ORIENTATIONS, DIFFERENT PRIORITIES

The five communities profiled in the mini-case studies had different overall orientations to the supports:

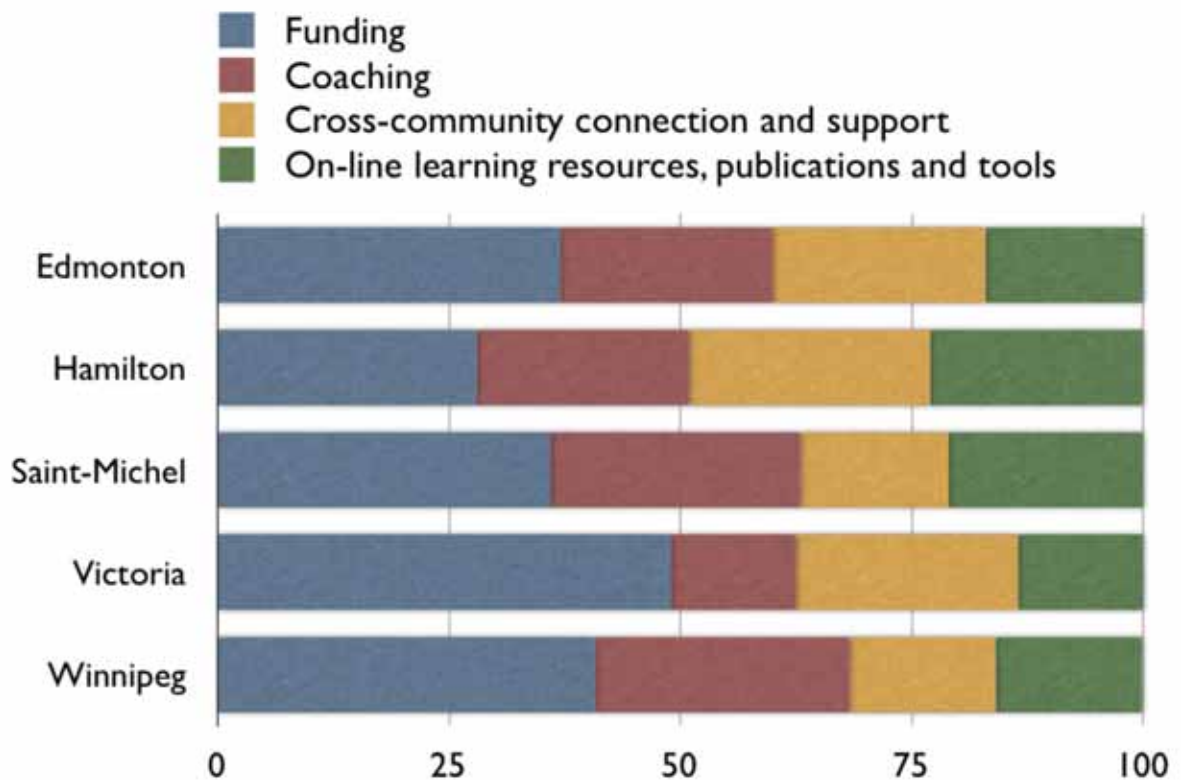
- Edmonton's learning style was more individualistic than collective. Initially, individuals functioned and learned separately; members were less open to bringing ideas in from the outside.
- Victoria provides an example of different stages experienced over time – 'storming and norming' in its beginning and later years, with a healthy learning partnership with VC through its middle years.
- Hamilton was a highly engaged and ambitious learner.
- Winnipeg was more measured in its use of supports. As Winnipeg's coach Garry Loewen notes: "One of the variables had to do with the nature of the people involved in the work. By the time that Winnipeg got in the game, there was a lot of knowledge in Vibrant Communities, so they got value on the coaching side. I know that in the early phases of the Winnipeg initiative, there was resistance to the idea that other communities were ahead of the game and that they had something to offer. Winnipeg was insular, which stopped members from getting a lot of value in the early days. This helps make the case for having the whole menu of supports available over time – different communities have different needs and styles."
- Saint-Michel was also a highly engaged and ambitious learner, but instead of aggressively pursuing learning from other communities, Saint-Michel focused on the more relational supports (e.g., coaching, face-to-face experiences).

How Five Trail Builder Communities Would Prioritize Supports Resources

Each community shaped its own configuration of supports based on their context, their needs and their aspirations. Local conveners played a critical role in that they funneled and mediated the supports. Depending on the learning orientation and approach of the convener, this influenced the way the broader set of community partners and local stakeholders were engaged in, and received notice of, supports and resources.



PRIORITIZATION OF SUPPORTS



It is not the patterns of effectiveness noted in Evaluating Vibrant Communities that determine the way supports are used and emphasized; rather, it is a set of local conditions. Patterns of effectiveness are shaped by the size of the community, their starting point, their aspirations, who is involved and the style of leadership. These are the same things that shape the way supports are used. This is not to say that a community will

always use supports in the same way. There are multiple variables interacting, and complexity tells us that these will produce emergent interactions and dynamics. There isn't a sweet spot or a perfect place on a continuum. The supports that will best resonate with the needs and interests of a community are dynamic and require a range of options shaped by ongoing feedback.

7 [MINE AND DISTILL]



The link between the experience of the Trail Builder communities and the policy expertise of the Caledon Institute was ground breaking. It was a first in Canada for a social policy institute to maintain such a lengthy and intense period of connection with an on-the-ground poverty reduction initiative. The result was policy work that was grounded in community practice and perspective. This was difficult work. Decisions about where to put focus – in individual communities and across VC as a whole – were challenging, given the complexities of poverty and the vast range of concerns identified by communities. The main strategy was to look for windows of opportunity and use them as leverage points.

The mining and distilling was multi-directional. The experience of communities brought texture and grounding to policy ideas and advice, and the implications of existing and proposed policies were interpreted and shared with communities.

For example, an elegant and extremely effective project conceived by Vibrant Communities Edmonton was its Make Tax Time Pay initiative. Organizers recognized that more and more benefits and subsidies were being delivered through the income tax system. Because they had little or no taxable income, many people living on low incomes were not filling in annual income tax forms. As a result, they were missing the chance to apply for up to ten benefits and subsidies. Make Tax Time Pay both illuminated the

benefits of delivering selected benefits through the income tax system and identified the access barriers and challenges faced by people living on low incomes. This learning was captured in a variety of Caledon publications, including community stories and the documentation of Edmonton's framework for change.

Another example of mining and distilling was the 2008 Caledon paper Poverty Policy. It examines Trail builder lessons as part of a discussion of the ten major policy areas that comprise the core of a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. Since its 2008 release, Poverty Policy has been referenced by provinces and territories as they design and institute provincial/territorial poverty reduction plans and strategies.



In total, Caledon produced a significant volume of publications and other documentation over the course of its ten-year involvement with Vibrant Communities. These included:

- 12 poverty and policy papers
- 3 publications written in partnership with Tamarack
- a monthly Provincial/Territorial Policy Monitor
- 10 “Engage!” submissions
- 37 community stories
- 13 theory of change stories
- 4 stories that detail government leadership in poverty reduction
- 6 reflection and thought pieces
- 6 papers for an HRDC-funded series about comprehensive community initiatives

Much of the work to mine and distill new learning was a combined effort where the lines between the national lead organizations were seamless. Tamarack tracked and identified on-the-ground practices that were ‘ripe’ for chronicling; Caledon articulated the links between policy and the practices of comprehensive community initiatives.

Over time, community work has enriched the perspective of policy work by enabling a comprehensive awareness of what has been happening in the country. Local problems and solutions have become reference points that have enriched national poverty reduction discussions.

8 [DISSEMINATION OF LEARNING]



A strong appetite for what was being learned from Vibrant Communities developed over the project's ten-year run. VC deployed two different strategies for disseminating its learnings.

The first was a shotgun approach using e-mail lists and the website to distribute papers and to invite participation in all tele-learning events. The second strategy was targeted engagement led by Tamarack principals Paul Born, Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver and Caledon Vice President Sherri Torjman. Speaking

engagements became opportunities to meet with local communities interested in poverty reduction, three levels of government and selected community organizations (e.g., United Way Canada and the Community Foundations of Canada).

SHOTGUN APPROACH

The shotgun approach was used to disseminate VC updates and learnings to as wide an audience as possible. This was done primarily through the Tamarack VC platforms including the website, tele-learning, and the Engage! newsletter.

The volume and diversity of resources released was substantial. For example, in 2011 alone, 894,677 files (all media types) were downloaded from the Tamarack website. The top eight downloads for Vibrant Communities materials were as follows:

1. Vibrant Communities Saint John literature review: Poverty, Homelessness and Teen Pregnancy - 10,268 downloads
2. The Working Poor: Invisible in America - 10,562 downloads
3. Vibrant Surrey publication: Sustainable Income - 6,927 downloads
4. Tamarack Institute: Sustainable Livelihoods Framework - 7,293 downloads

5. *Engage!* article: Measuring Community Change - 4,102 downloads
6. Tamarack website: VC Evaluation overview - 4,682 downloads
7. Jamie Gamble: Vibrant Communities 2002-2010: Evaluation Report – e-book - 4,655 downloads
8. Jamie Gamble: Vibrant Communities 2002-2010: Evaluation Report - 2,450 hard copy books distributed

In addition, there were more than 90,000 multi-media downloads (podcasts) in 2011 of which approximately two-thirds were VC-specific material.



The volume and diversity of material disseminated was matched by the volume and diversity of those accessing the information. In 2010, for example:

- People from 520 different organizations participated in tele-learning calls
- 1592 individuals participated in more than one tele-learning call.
- 1400 people who were not part of Trail Builder communities or one of the VC national partners participated in at least one tele-learning. These individuals came from 350 different communities, many from Canada, but also from other countries

The primary users of these resources came from a variety of places. These include staff from nonprofit agencies (47%) and government departments (41%). Just under half of the users of broadly-disseminated materials were working on poverty reduction directly (14%), or work that related to poverty reduction (31%). Fifty-five percent of respondents reported their work was on issues other than poverty reduction.

Overall, the users of the information reported a high degree of satisfaction with the material:

- 71% found articles and guides very useful (24% found them somewhat useful)
- 90% have downloaded resources, 83% shared resources with another colleague, 41% invited a colleague to participate, 23% have made contact with someone introduced through a Tamarack learning resource

- 25% have modeled a local initiative based on a Tamarack resource or connection

The above data is likely representative of a higher-than-normally-engaged subset of people accessing Tamarack materials. We should be cautious in drawing any overarching conclusions about all users of Tamarack resource material.

The growth in participation and the high number of repeat users is a good proxy for concluding there is high value in the material being disseminated. VC has disseminated its resources effectively – there is a broad and diverse reach, robust distribution and participation.

To find Vibrant Communities resources, as well as new and emerging information and perspective on poverty reduction and community building go to www.vibrantcanada.ca

8 [DISSEMINATION OF LEARNING]



TARGETED DISSEMINATION

The second dissemination strategy was targeted engagement led by the staff of the Tamarack Institute and Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute. This strategy focused on identifying and sharing Vibrant Communities learnings with people and organizations that have a significant influence on poverty reduction work in Canada. It included:

- The Federal Government (HRSDC)
- Select provincial governments (New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta)
- Municipal governments (Hamilton, Montréal and others)
- Selected voluntary organizations – notably the United Way of Canada and the Community Foundations of Canada

These efforts were supported by the various reports and documents produced by Tamarack and Caledon.

Targeted dissemination played out in a variety of ways. Vibrant Communities provided nationally-recognized spaces in which to discuss issues connected to poverty. Poverty's impacts on households and lessons from relevant community efforts were documented and used to illustrate the kinds of policies that would be supportive of community work. For example, numerous meetings with, and presentations to, the Prime Minister's Office contributed to the creation of

"Action for Neighbourhood Change," a federally-supported neighbourhood renewal initiative that operated from 2005 to 2007.

The Caledon Institute is frequently invited to make presentations on poverty and related issues to governments at all levels and to a wide range of organizations. One example is the annual Policy Horizons conference where senior officials, most of whom would have an economic policy focus, are exposed to lessons about comprehensive, community initiatives.

Vibrant Communities staff also targeted discussions with public and philanthropic funders to explore how such organizations could better support comprehensive approaches to reducing poverty. This work included:

- A concerted effort to provide presentations and offer workshops at the national meetings of organizations such as the United Way/ Centraide Canada and Community Foundations of Canada
- Topic-specific tele-learning series on Social Justice Grantmaking⁶, Funding Lasting Change⁷, and Comprehensive Grantmaking⁸
- A time-limited Funders Forum convened by the The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the Tamarack Institute which allowed funders to explore common challenges and opportunities

6 http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s61_VC_013106.html

7 <http://vibrantcanada.ca/content/funding-lasting-change-communities-embedded-funders> and <http://vibrantcanada.ca/content/funding-lasting-change-communities-calgary-foundation>

8 http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s61_VC_Grantmaking.html



Vibrant Communities has also informed the development of poverty reduction efforts at the provincial/territorial level. VC sponsors and communities have presented to, or been connected with, poverty reduction strategies in New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Québec, Ontario, Manitoba and the three territories.

Vibrant Communities also provided extra support to communities that are not part of the VC network but that are eager nonetheless to apply its lessons to local work.

Some of these include communities in:

Québec: Lower North Shore

Ontario: Peel Region, Halton Region, Guelph, Peterborough, Kingston, Windsor, Brantford

Prairies: Saskatoon, Lethbridge, Red Deer, Medicine Hat

British Columbia: Burnaby, Richmond

The targeted and shotgun dissemination strategies were part of an integrated whole. The overlapping and collaborative roles that have developed between Tamarack and Caledon in the mining and distillation of learnings illustrate why the overall combination of supports is important. For example, Caledon would discuss the unfolding community practice communities with Tamarack in order to distill policy implications. Coaches working closely with communities would assist Caledon in articulating the theory of change stories.

9 [CONCLUSIONS]



The decision faced by many funders and intermediaries is to determine if an investment in learning, networking, knowledge production and dissemination leverages other investments and activity.

Investment in Supports, Trail Builder Communities and Local Resources Mobilized from by 2010 (Cumulative)

	2010
Supports Budget (Various Sources)	\$4,511,922
McConnell Investment in Communities	\$5,065,832
Matched Investments from Communities	\$14,634,042

When the purpose of an initiative is to promote action learning for advancing a knowledge base, this is clearly a good investment in money, time and energy. Vibrant Communities had such a purpose – it was a national network of engaged learners exploring how to tackle the complex issue of poverty in a comprehensive and multisectoral way.

For Vibrant Communities, the mix of supports was instrumental in building capacity, facilitating the uptake of VC principles and generating a set of insights and lessons. We can say with confidence that capacity has clearly been built. Trail Builders derived both instrumental benefits (discrete learning that was directly applicable to their efforts) and long-term benefits (cumulative learning over time that contributed to an overall strategy and approach).

Funding was clearly important. It provided the original incentive and capacity for communities to meaningfully commit to a learning and experimenting process. If VC supports were a car,

funding would be its engine. In a major initiative such as VC, where there is a significant investment combined with an action-research agenda, supports are more than luxury features – they are the car's wheels, transmission and steering. Coaching, cross-community connection and support, and on-line resources, publications and tools are essential parts of the VC vehicle.

When dealing with a complex phenomenon, learning the ropes and enabling feedback loops are a necessary part of the intervention. In the complex, how you engage is part of the nature of the intervention.

Capacity is not just about content, it is about learning how to learn in the context of the issue you are addressing. Knowing what you need to know to address challenges in a community that has organized to reduce poverty is often not immediately clear. Over time, communities better understand their situations, are exposed to alternatives from other communities, and build



capacity for taking ideas and lessons and adapting them to their local context. VC offers an example of community capacity building in which – through rapid experimentation – everyone gets a sense of what works. Strong relationships enable co-evolution. VC has shown that building the capacity of conveners – and the generation of ideas and strategies that it encourages – is an essential part of supporting poverty reduction work and evolving our abilities to deal with the issue effectively.

It is important to recognize that there is a set of competencies that goes with effective coaching, shared learning, knowledge production and dissemination. High-quality reports need someone to write them, effective conferences (both telephone and face-to-face) demand capable facilitation and strong production values, and strong networks need stewardship. This is a high-value capability that should not be underestimated. Doing this work well requires multiple modalities, delivered with expertise, at a fairly intensive scale of effort.

Vibrant Communities was launched in order to achieve an ambitious goal: exploring, mining, and disseminating a new practice. This is a small and demanding niche. The purpose of this evaluation is to inform future efforts of a similar nature. Based on the many lessons identified in this paper, the following recommendations are provided:

Recommendations to Intermediaries

- An initiative of this nature is fundamentally about the overall package, and not the discrete elements. It is risky to link any one support to the benefits derived from the whole. Intermediaries supporting this kind of work should think comprehensively when developing supports and consider how elements might be mutually reinforcing.
- Because of the interplay between the complexities of poverty and the particularities of each community, different kinds of supports are needed at different times. Intermediaries should support a diverse range of options, offered over time.
- There is a high level of skills required to effectively deliver comprehensive supports: facilitation, writing, supporting networks and building relationships require sophisticated expertise. The mining, distilling, and dissemination of learning also have distinct requirements. Intermediaries should take stock of their capacity and expertise to do this work and build partnerships and/or internal capacity if this is not an area where there is existing capacity.
- Relationships breathe life into an initiative such as this – they require time, effort and nurturing. The people involved leave an imprint on the work as it unfolds. This involvement can create momentum when individuals join an initiative or stall it when they move on. Intermediaries should make relationship development and stewardship a core part of their activity.

9 [CONCLUSIONS]



- Tangible support like helping with problem solving, sharing of program or policy initiatives and providing evaluation assistance works in combination with more intangible support elements: theories of change, shared language and options for governance. Intermediaries should provide both practical support as well as a theoretical basis for the work.

Recommendations to Funders

When a high level of engagement in exploring and learning is desired, funding is a critical incentive and mechanism for enabling robust participation. Part of the strength of Vibrant Communities was the consistency of funding over time. Funders should enter into long-term engagements when supporting initiatives with a learning and exploring agenda.

- There are clear benefits to establishing an interconnected architecture of supports in situations where the burden of learning is high. Funders should be prepared to direct resources to supports in situations where there are similar conditions and objectives to Vibrant Communities – i.e., an action learning agenda for a comprehensive community initiative working on a complex issue.
- Funders should be involved as fully-engaged players, rather than distant observers, so that they can learn, develop trust with partners and understand (and champion) mid-course adjustment.

Recommendations to Local Groups/Communities

- Participating in a community of practice has clear benefits for the organizations involved. Communities should commit to doing this part of the work well and investing the requisite time, energy and skills.
- Peers from other communities can help organizations to innovate and to move more quickly in implementing new approaches and initiatives. Communities should engage in peer learning as a vital source of ideas and perspective.
- The combination of supports, external investment and local resources is generative. Communities should position external resources to leverage their overall scope of work and to assist in accelerating the pace of their efforts.

It is difficult to determine what would have happened without the Vibrant Communities initiative. Many (though not all) cities involved would likely have been working on poverty reduction even without VC's national supports. It is safe to say, however, that without Vibrant Communities, the shape of local strategies would have been fundamentally different; they would not have progressed as quickly, or in some cases, as well.



VC has built a base of knowledge and a set of relationships that can continue to be leveraged in the months and years ahead. Like all learning and networks, these outcomes have a shelf life, but the benefits that accrued thanks to Vibrant Communities' investment in supports should serve future efforts well. The bottom line is that in the realm of complex issues and comprehensive efforts to mobilize learning and new approaches, the full suite of supports offered through VC was an essential ingredient in its ultimate success.