



TAMARACK - AN INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**The way we treat our most vulnerable citizens is the truest measure of our national character.
We must include all residents in shaping Canada's future.**

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WWW.TAMARACKCOMMUNITY.CA

Tamarack tests ideas about community building, poverty reduction, collaboration and engagement, and generates knowledge based on what works best in practice. It develops and supports collaborative strategies that engage citizens and institutions to solve major community challenges, and to learn from and share these experiences. The Institute sponsors projects and provides learning resources, training, coaching and strategic consulting that enable people to collaborate and learn with and from each other. Vibrant Communities, in collaboration with the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, is Tamarack's signature work and is active in 14 cities and has so far reduced the impact of poverty for more than 147,000 people in Canada.

Poverty in Canada*

According to Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off, in 2007, three million Canadians or 9.2 percent of the population lived in poverty. Recent immigrants, Aboriginal people, women and single-parent families are more likely to live in poverty than other Canadians. Poverty rates are also higher in Canada's urban centres.

As a result, communities, large and small, are facing increasingly complex and challenging issues, including homelessness, poverty and ways to build economic prosperity. The solutions to these complex problems cannot be found in a single sector.

To help govern a community-based, anti-poverty strategy that involves many players and processes, a local decision-making table is created to set a guiding vision for the overall effort and its strategic plan. A unique strength of these local tables is that they are composed of diverse sectors, including voluntary organizations, businesses, government, and people with lived experience of the problem. These local tables coordinate the multiple actions that are needed to tackle complex problems, identify ways to create new interventions and work on policy interventions.



Paul Born

Paul Born is the President of Tamarack, an organization founded with Maytree. Before taking on this role, he was the Executive Director and founder of The Community Opportunities Development Association (CODA) for twelve years where he founded Opportunities 2000, a millennium campaign to reduce poverty in the Waterloo Region to the lowest in Canada, which was recognized as one of the United Nations' Top 40 Projects Worldwide. His work has also been recognized with awards from the Conference Board of Canada, Imagine Canada and the Governor General of Canada. An author of three books, including his bestseller *Community Conversations*, Paul has extensive experience in helping organizations and communities to develop new and sustainable ideas that motivate people to collaborative action.

* This section was prepared by Paul Born and Sherri Torjman.

Vibrant Communities

The pan-Canadian Vibrant Communities project, involving 14 cities working together on local solutions to reduce poverty, has demonstrated the value of a national system of supports, including peer learning coupled with intensive local coaching. A strong group of participants involved in sharing effective practice allows members to support each other in grappling with tough problems, acquiring resources, sharing new methods and reducing barriers. The partners have learned that strategic learning involves more than a simple mail-out of web-based descriptions or written stories. Rather, it is the thoughtful and deliberate application of tested interventions.

Policy Ideas to Reduce Poverty

1. Create a Community Fund of \$25 million run by an arm's-length body to help communities operate local decision-making tables.

While place-based initiatives vary widely throughout the country, they all require an enabling environment if they are to function effectively. Governments can help support these initiatives through direct assistance. Funding typically goes to programs and services but rarely is made available to enable the challenging work involved in convening multiple and diverse parties.

The federal government should create a Community Fund, administered by an arm's-length body such as a foundation or nonprofit organization with a mandate to effect community-based change. The government would develop a set of principles to guide funding decisions which would ensure diversity of investment in terms of geography, community size and nature of the proposed interventions.

The Community Fund would match the first \$100,000 raised annually at the local level to enable communities to set up and operate their respective decision-making tables over the course of five years. The Fund would incorporate clear monitoring and review processes to track progress toward stated objectives and identified targets. It would also be required to produce a public annual report of its grant decisions.

A fund of \$25 million would help 50 communities develop and implement their own poverty reduction strategies for five years.

Further Reading:

Visit the Vibrant Communities website to see how communities are doing this work at www.vibrantcommunities.ca.

2. Designate and fund a nonprofit organization to provide coaching and other technical assistance to local communities fighting poverty.

Communities involved in comprehensive local efforts to tackle poverty or other complex issues must undertake a wide range of tasks to carry out their work effectively. The federal government can play a crucial role in these efforts by supporting the provision of technical assistance. Funding can be provided to a designated nonprofit organization or centre that would train and assign coaches to local initiatives around key interventions. These include leadership development, strategic planning, data collection and interpretation, fundraising and evaluation.

Seven coaches and supporting staff for 50 to 100 communities would cost the federal government \$5 million over five years.

Based on the Vibrant Communities' experience, these efforts could reduce poverty for more than 100,000 Canadians.

Further Reading:

Read the Vibrant Communities 2009 annual report and also the book *Creating Vibrant Communities* by Paul Born at www.vibrantcommunities.ca.

3. Create a \$2-million learning fund (over five years) to promote cross-community exchange for poverty reduction.

Tackling tough problems, such as poverty, requires that communities learn from one another. Yet communities rarely have the resources or capacity to undertake or carry out this crucial learning function on an ongoing or systematic basis. There are scarce resources for building upon and transferring the approaches already known to be effective.

A learning fund to promote cross-community exchange of effective local solutions would represent an important advance. This fund should be \$400,000 annually and designated for five years for maximum effect.

Further Reading:

Chapter 8: "Creating an Enabling Environment" in Sherri Torjman's *Shared Space: The Communities Agenda*. 2007. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy.



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