# Policy Dialogue

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*Purpose of this paper*

This paper was developed in support of a new national initiative called Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC). ANC is a pan-Canadian project that involves four national and five local partners in an effort to revitalize and improve the quality of life in five selected neighbourhoods across the country.

The four national partners are United Way of Canada – Centraide Canada, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the National Film Board of Canada and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. The five local partners are United Ways in Halifax, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Regina and Surrey. These local partners are expected to convene a process that brings together individuals who reflect the views of diverse sectors including voluntary organizations, business and governments as well as people living in poverty, in an effort to revitalize their respective neighbourhoods.

Action for Neighbourhood Change also involves as partners its five key government sponsors: the National Secretariat on Homelessness (Human Resources and Skills Development), Office for Learning Technologies (Human Resources and Skills Development), National Literacy Secretariat (Human Resources and Skills Development), Canada's Drug Strategy (Health Canada) and National Crime Prevention Strategy (Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada). Other branches and departments may be asked to join as this initiative unfolds.

The ANC project will document the overall process as well as the stories of the five local partners. Each local site will embark upon the process in a unique way, depending upon the distinctive assets and concerns of the neighbourhood. The project also involves a number of learning and evaluation components and several policy papers policy papers. One of the roles of the Caledon Institute is to host a 'policy dialogue' that includes the five major governmental funders and representatives from the participating neighbourhoods.

This paper focuses on dialogue as a means of addressing concerns related to relevant policy issues and administrative processes. More specifically, it explores the concept of policy dialogue, reviews some lessons from practice and considers the relevance of these lessons to the ANC project.

At the very least, a policy dialogue involving several different departments enables horizontal management within government itself. But it is also one vehicle for encouraging governments to talk with community participants about policy, program and administrative issues that affect citizens and organizations. Finally, policy dialogue has been employed to help make constructive change around identified policy concerns.

*Horizontal management*

Action for Neighbourhood Change seeks to enhance the capacity of five selected neighbourhoods to deliberate and act collectively in order to improve the quality of life in five selected neighbourhoods. The government is supporting the revitalization of these neighbourhoods to inform the development of the new Canadian Housing Framework, with attention to housing stability in strong neighbourhoods.

The work is also central to Canada's Drug Strategy, the National Crime Prevention Strategy and to the federal skills and learning agenda that includes improved literacy and the more effective use of learning technologies. The project effectively seeks to create a holistic community-driven approach that enables related federal initiatives to meet common objectives and outcomes.

Action for Neighbourhood Change is not unique in its efforts to bring together different departments in order to achieve common goals. Increasingly, governments are trying to ensure that relevant branches and departments collaborate around areas of common interest. These cross-cutting areas include, for example, climate change, Aboriginal concerns and issues pertaining to cities and communities.

Many of the objectives that the federal government seeks to achieve are complex and relate to the mandates of two or more departments, jurisdictions or nongovernmental organizations. On the one hand, this complexity is positive. It means that various departments, which share common interests, can pool their resources and expertise.

At the same time, this complexity can create management challenges. It requires a horizontal governance approach in order to address the concerns that involve several different departments. In fact, Treasury Board points out in its document *The Development of Results-based Management and Accountability Frameworks for Horizontal Initiatives* that the ability of government to build alliances, form partnerships and manage horizontal initiatives actually is considered an essential ingredient for delivering high-quality, cost-effective public services.

Collaborative arrangements are being driven partly by the pressure to enhance performance and achieve measurable improvements in service delivery. The 2005 Budget was the latest in a string of federal documents that highlight the need to strengthen and modernize public sector management. Horizontal management is seen as one way to ensure that the federal government acts as a vibrant, cohesive and coherent national institution [Fitzpatrick 2000].

Horizontality exists when managers are responsible for particular areas that require tools and interventions found outside of their primary areas of responsibility. They choose, instead, to take a wider approach that seeks to include the interests, resources and constraints of colleagues working in similar areas [Fitzpatrick 2000]. This type of collaborative work differs from traditional methods in that it views 'outside interests' not as competitors but as potential partners.

Managing a horizontal initiative involves entering into an arrangement with partners in which there is shared authority and responsibility, joint investment of resources (e.g., time, funding and expertise), shared risk, and mutual benefits and common results. While the various federal initiatives may have distinct objectives, the factors or root causes that lead to the outcomes are shared.

Just like comprehensive initiatives in community work [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003], collaborative relationships in government create value by bringing new resources, insights and expertise to the table. These relationships can help increase efficiency and effectiveness through shared investment and reduced conflict.

Despite the many benefits of horizontal management, there are major challenges associated with this practice. Horizontal management invariably encounters stumbling blocks due to its cross-cultural character and the diverse interests it often brings together. Problems also can arise around communication and decision-making authority. There can be confusion as to who should carry out certain actions and which departments, as well as actors within the individual departments, should take responsibility for the results. The problem also arises between government and local groups collaborating on various community projects.

The potential confusion around roles and responsibilities points to the need for clear accountability mechanisms. There must be well defined objectives with specific roles and responsibilities for the involved parties. Horizontal management processes ideally should embed the following features: accountability expectations and procedures, transparent decision-making, dispute resolution processes, performance measures and results reporting.

The Canadian Centre for Management Development (now the Canada School of Public Service) has identified several factors as critical components of horizontal governance. Creating a shared framework is essential to ensure that all parties are working toward the same goals. The spirit of cooperation can be translated into action and subsequent results by putting into place a framework that identifies tangible goals and accountability mechanisms.

Creating supportive structures is another key step in helping managers to foster relationships of trust and achieve common goals. Informal structures are less resource intensive, more flexible and less binding on members. Formal structures, by contrast, are resource intensive but less ambiguous. The policy dialogue described below is an example of a supportive structure that combines both informal and formal elements.

Other actions that contribute to the success of horizontal management include sharing leadership and responsibility, building trust and linking cultures. Dialogue is one method of building relationships, which effectively are at the core of a team-based approach.

Horizontal management basically refers to the way in which governments can work more effectively to manage so-called 'complex files' involving issues that cut across several different departments.  In this case, horizontality is required because there are causes and outcomes that are shared across discrete areas of departmental responsibility.  But there is also substantial activity taking place outside government in which communities are experimenting with their own unique ways of addressing complex issues.

A body of literature is emerging around the purpose and value of various forms of dialogue in order to effect policy change and engage citizens in exploring concerns that affect their lives.  These discussions are being employed in an effort to involve citizens in decision-making, learn about various issues and resolve disputes [Yankelovich 1999].

*Deliberative dialogue,* for example, refers to a face-to-face method of interaction in which small groups of diverse individuals exchange opinions around common concern.  The process allows participants to examine public issues and develop strategies for change.  This form of dialogue typically requires a trained moderator and a set of discussion guides to help frame the various positions.

*Policy dialogue* is a process that may or may not involve citizens.   It may or may not result in compromise solutions that deliberative dialogue seeks to achieve.  There are several distinct purposes of policy dialogue including information sharing, direction setting, promoting administrative coherence and problem solving.  Each of these areas is discussed below.

While there has been considerable experimentation in recent years with deliberative dialogue, there are fewer examples of practice involving policy dialogue.  Outlined below is a description of the policy dialogue in which the Caledon Institute was involved for the Vibrant Communities national project and the key lessons learned through this process.  These lessons are then applied to the Action for Neighbourhood Change initiative.

### Vibrant Communities policy dialogue

The Vibrant Communities policy dialogue was organized as part of the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI), which had been established to develop and encourage closer working relationships between government and voluntary organizations.  The VSI emerged after years of tension in which the voluntary sector was reeling from a series of cutbacks to government programs − not only to the services that many agencies were delivering but also to the core budgets of the organizations themselves.  Both the voluntary sector and municipal governments had to pick up many services offloaded by by provincial (and the federal) governments without sufficient funding.

Moreover, many voluntary organizations felt that their concerns were not being adequately considered in the formulation of public policy. They rarely were included in formulating decisions − even though these substantially affected their work and the people with whom they were concerned.

The Voluntary Sector Initiative sought to build a new partnership between the federal government and voluntary sector that would be respectful and transparent. A series of codes of conduct was produced after extensive consultation.

> Policy dialogue between the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector is essential to ensure that policies benefit from the sector's experience, expertise, knowledge and ideas. The voluntary sector plays a crucial role in representing the views of its stakeholders to the Government of Canada, in particular, those of unheard and minority voices [Voluntary Sector Initiative 2001].

*An Accord between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector* sets out the principles for this relationship and for dialogue in particular. Dialogue should be open, respectful, informed and welcome a range of viewpoints. It should be carried out in a way that respects each party's confidential information, and builds and maintains trust. Appropriately designed processes and governance structures are necessary to achieve sustained dialogue [Voluntary Sector Initiative 2001].

Within the Voluntary Sector Initiative, special funds were allocated to support projects that sought explicitly to forge a working relationship between selected voluntary organizations and a designated federal department or several departments. Under the VSI, the Caledon Institute received funding from (the former) Human Resources Development Canada to develop a policy component − in the form of policy papers and a policy dialogue − within the Vibrant Communities project.[1] A number of lessons can be drawn from that experience.

At the heart of Vibrant Communities is a pan-Canadian learning community, which brings together 15 cities from across the country seeking local solutions to reduce poverty. Victoria, Surrey, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Niagara, Waterloo, Toronto, Hamilton, Saint-Michel, Trois Rivières, Saint John, Halifax and Cape Breton are working, both individually and collectively, in this search.

Representatives from each of these centres meet on a monthly basis, typically by teleconference, to develop and share practice around their respective areas of work. It is a structured meeting organized and hosted jointly by Tamarack and Caledon.

Six communities, in particular, receive additional financial support through Vibrant Communities to pursue intensive poverty reduction agendas: Victoria, Niagara, Edmonton, Saint-Michel, Saint John and Calgary. Together, they are referred to as 'Trail Builders' to reflect their pioneering role.

Each Trail Builder is governed by a local body or coordinating mechanism. The local governance body plans, implements and evaluates all aspects of the poverty reduction strategy. In order to participate in Vibrant Communities, Trail Builders must

involve representatives from at least four key sectors: business, government, the voluntary sector and people living in poverty.

The policy component is a third major dimension of this national initiative and consists of several key areas of work. The first task involved the documentation of the unique approach to community action being undertaken by the project.

Several reports were written that explain the overall approach, including the features of comprehensive community initiatives. They are long term. They involve more than one sector. They seek to formulate a comprehensive plan even though they must identify the areas where the community can move strategically and at what pace. They devise new solutions and interventions by virtue of the novel combinations of ideas and resources [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003].

The documentation of these approaches helps give weight to community practice. Often the latter is so wide-ranging and diverse that there appears to be no clear underlying methodology. Yet there *is* a definite method that these processes embody.

Comprehensive community initiatives involve several clear steps such as conducting a community scan; identifying appropriate convener and partners; developing a strategic plan of action with clear roles, responsibilities and protocols of behaviour; garnering support for the plan; implementing the plan; collecting data and monitoring progress; and evaluating the initiative. Of course, community work typically does not proceed in a linear or orderly fashion – though the key steps in the process are crucial [Torjman 2005].

Another component of the policy work involved a policy dialogue that the Caledon Institute hosted over an 18-month period. The purpose of the dialogue was to deepen awareness among government policy-makers about comprehensive, multisectoral and community-based strategies for poverty reduction. Although many policy-makers acknowledge the role that communities can play in addressing complex issues such as poverty, public servants rarely have an extended opportunity to explore with grassroots practitioners the challenges involved in local work.

The policy dialogue provided a forum for government and community participants to reflect on the ways in which they could work together to tackle poverty. Representatives were invited from 10 federal departments including Human Resources Development, Health, Heritage, Justice, Status of Women, Industry, Citizenship and Immigration, Privy Council Office (Urban Aboriginal Strategy), Indian and Northern Affairs, and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

While the government representatives met in person, phone lines were hooked up across the country to enable the communities to participate as they wished. They were informed of the topic in advance and then made a decision as to whether they would have a member on the line. Occasionally, representatives from provincial governments and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities joined these discussions as well.

A major goal of the policy dialogue was to share information around issues of common interest. Meetings typically consisted of updates on the progress of Vibrant Communities, followed by a presentation by one of the policy dialogue participants.

A deliberate effort was made to alternate presentations between government and community participants so as to foster a genuine sharing of perspectives between policy-makers and practitioners. Initial meetings focused on building a common language and frame of reference for thinking about comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction. The sessions helped establish a shared understanding among participants about the nature of this approach to poverty reduction.

Subsequent meetings explored specific dimensions of the work. Selected topics focused upon local practice (e.g., principles of comprehensive community initiatives and the roles of business and government); substantive issues related to poverty reduction (e.g., social exclusion, the anti-poverty law in Quebec and the application of a gender lens); and administrative questions (e.g., community information and evaluation).

Throughout the process, an attempt was made to encourage the participation of low-income residents. Community members from Saskatoon, for example, described both the 20-year plan they had developed to revitalize inner city neighbourhoods and their efforts to strengthen the voice of low-income residents in provincial welfare policy. In another case, representatives from the Inner City Halifax project, most of whom are African Nova Scotian, talked about issues related to racism and discrimination.

### *Lessons from the policy dialogue*

As noted, a number of lessons can be drawn from the experience of the Vibrant Communities policy dialogue. These are important to articulate in order to consider their application to similar efforts, such as Action for Neighbourhood Change.

One key lesson was that the policy dialogue process could help fulfill several purposes: sharing information, setting common directions, consolidating administrative procedures and solving problems. These areas are described below, in order of increasing complexity and commitment.

### *i. Sharing information*

The primary purpose of the policy dialogue was to share information about comprehensive community work. While the exchange of information is the most common function of these kinds of meetings, it actually requires the least involvement and commitment from participants.

An evaluation of the policy dialogue found that the process had helped identify the key features of this emerging form of practice.  But the dialogue was equally valuable in enabling government representatives to share information with each other.

It was clear from the discussions that most departments were not familiar with the work of other departments − even around similar initiatives.  Most participants in the policy dialogue had not heard, for example, about Health Canada's work on social exclusion even though several were concerned with issues related to this theme.  Few were aware, despite their interest in homelessness and poverty, of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation policies intended for low-income households.  Most did not know that the Status of Women had been developing a gender and poverty lens, which had potential for application to other groups.

One government representative in the Vibrant Communities policy dialogue also pointed out that different departments may be supporting efforts in the same city and likely were not aware of this duplication.  Clearly, the lack of coherence creates problems around the effective and strategic use of public funds.  In fact, the duplication actually can create a burden upon communities that typically are loathe to refuse funds but at the same time must deal with multiple deadlines, accountability and reporting expectations.

It would be unrealistic to expect that duplication between departments would ever be entirely eliminated.  In some cases, it actually may be a good thing in that it can act as a critical source of innovation and security in a complex system.  But these overlaps should be acknowledged and must be productive rather than wasteful.

The policy dialogue helped not only to deepen the understanding of policy-makers about the dynamics involved in comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction.  The discussions also created opportunities for further collaboration.

Due to its involvement in the policy dialogue, for example, Status of Women Canada recognized an opportunity to help Vibrant Communities address the gender dimensions of poverty.  A year-long Gender and Poverty Project subsequently was undertaken by the Vibrant Communities national sponsors and six community partners.

During the policy dialogue, representatives from the National Crime Prevention Centre convened a meeting with other government departments and Vibrant Communities to share strategies for evaluating complex community initiatives. Participants also proposed that federal departments engaged in similar work coordinate their efforts to profile conditions in communities.

*ii. Setting common directions*

A policy dialogue can help *set common directions* for initiatives that touch upon or relate to the work of several departments. The success of these complex initiatives depends upon a solid and strategic foundation with a clear statement of overall objectives and desired policy directions.

The Vibrant Communities policy dialogue did not focus upon setting common directions. The project was already under way when the policy dialogue was created. Moreover, the federal government was not the primary sponsor of the project. Three national organizations − Tamarack-An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation − initiated the Vibrant Communities project.

Because Action for Neighbourhood Change, by contrast, was initiated by government, the potential for setting common directions is highly relevant to this project. In fact, the government partners have made substantial efforts to articulate a common vision and direction for the project. They are now working to ensure that administrative procedures line up accordingly.

Government partners also must ensure continued adherence to agreed-upon directions, especially in light of ongoing policy and staff changes that can result in a shift in perspectives. This challenge speaks again to the importance of a clearly articulated and shared framework and a single project contribution agreement to guide horizontal initiatives.

*iii. Consolidating government procedures*

A third major function of policy dialogue is to *consolidate*, where possible and appropriate, *common government procedures* that apply across departments, such as application and evaluation. The consolidation of procedures is especially relevant for the Action for Neighbourhood Change project in which five government partners have pooled their support in respect of a common goal.

Communities often are overwhelmed by government requirements in the form of extensive submission procedures requiring different (and sometimes conflicting) kinds of information and letters of support. Ideally, the application process in respect of the same or similar initiatives should be coordinated to reduce the administrative burden on both communities and governments and, where possible, to promote program coherence.

The streamlining of submission procedures is only one part of the process. Evaluation of community efforts represents another potential area for consolidation. The assessment of comprehensive community initiatives is a complex and resource-intensive undertaking, due to their multiple dimensions and points of intervention.

Because all departments require an evaluation of the projects they support, communities end up collecting information from several diverse sources. Considerable resources end up being invested in 'accountability.' While essential, this activity diverts community time and funds from their primary focus, such as reducing homelessness. Meanwhile, scarce tax dollars are being used to support duplicate assessments when a more uniform and coordinated evaluation process would likely be more effective and efficient.

As noted, one member of the policy dialogue took action to address this problem by initiating a small working group composed of several departments. The group met to determine the type of information that would be required for the evaluation of complex community processes and how best to consolidate this work among several federal departments.

Another dimension of collective work involves the identification of vital socioeconomic data such as local job opportunities, apartment vacancies, unemployment rates or crime statistics. Questions arose as to how best to determine the demographic profile of a given region or neighbourhood and where to find information about service providers in a given community.

In addition to formal information, there were questions about the appropriate sources of informal networks or community 'intelligence' – i.e., key individuals, groups and organizations involved in relevant issues such as child development, homelessness, or poverty reduction. Initiatives already under way in a given community are an important base for complementary work.

It makes no sense for each department to do its own information gathering and to seek virtually identical information from the same communities. This work represents a duplication of effort and again can create a burden on communities if they are approached continually for similar purposes. Equally important is the need for consistency in the profile, database and community 'story' being employed by various departments.

At one meeting of the Vibrant Communities policy dialogue, representatives from the statistical agency of the government of Newfoundland and Labrador presented their work on the creation of a set of Community Accounts, developed in association with Memorial University and the provincial Strategic Social Plan.

Community Accounts are compiled from a variety of statistical databases and sources of information that are then turned into a uniform template for every community across the province. They include demographic, economic, labour market, social and environmental information. The profiles are posted to a Community Accounts website to which all government departments, community organizations and individuals have access. The information enables each area to understand its own profile; the province-wide consistency allows comparison across communities to help them assess their own progress relative to similar region.

*iv. Solving problems*

Finally, policy dialogue provides a forum for collaborative *problem solving*, which clearly moves beyond the simple sharing of information. The joint resolution of problems can enable deliberative discussions in which various departments work together to tackle difficult issues.

It is of interest that one of the local partners in the Vibrant Communities project used policy dialogue as a way to address a specific concern in that jurisdiction. The United Way of Calgary, which is the local convener for that initiative, organized a set of meetings involving community organizations and representatives from the Alberta government to discuss problems related to a provincially administered program. Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) pays monthly benefits to persons with severe and prolonged impairments [Makhoul 2005].

The intent of that policy dialogue was to address the problems embedded in the AISH program through dialogue rather than dissent − through collaboration rather than conflict. The groups knew that they could always resort to confrontation with the government, if required. They resolved, instead, to begin with focused discussion. The rationale was that if the government representatives understood the presenting problems, they would be in a better position to address them or at least propose compromise solutions.

The provincial government responded positively to the process and has announced several key changes. The example is important in that it represents the potential of this methodology to tackle tough policy issues. Local policy dialogue is another potential application to the Action for Neighbourhood Change initiative.

The model also shows that policy dialogue need not be a process that carries on indefinitely. Ideally, the dialogue should be streamlined and strategic − effectively set up at any time when policy problems are identified and wrapped up when issues are satisfactorily resolved.

**Implications for the ANC**

The ANC policy dialogue has been structured to involve representatives from the five federal sponsors of the project: the National Secretariat on Homelessness, Office for Learning Technologies and National Literacy Secretariat (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada), Canada's Drug Strategy (Health Canada) and National Crime Prevention Strategy (Public Security and Emergency Preparedness Canada). The lessons from the previous work have helped shape both the content and format of the ANC policy dialogue.

A major lesson from Vibrant Communities is the importance of a safe place for dialogue. Federal participants in the policy dialogue identified as one of its strengths the opportunity for various departments to share information and ideas related to their work in and with communities.

It also was suggested that having a nongovernmental body convene the dialogue was important in enabling this process to occur. Third-party facilitation can help prevent tensions that might arise if any one department were seen as promoting its own agenda in a proposed collaboration.

For the Action for Neighbourhood Change project, Caledon will continue to play the role of convener for the national policy dialogue. We have introduced, however, several key modifications for the purposes of this project.

### *i*. *Membership*

As noted, Vibrant Communities was initiated by three national organizations outside of government. Representatives from various federal departments were invited to participate in an ongoing conversation. It clearly was appropriate for one of the national sponsors to play the role of convener and it made sense for the organization involved in policy issues to take the lead in that domain. The intent was to engage the government in learning more about the initiative and the barriers that communities face in their local efforts to reduce poverty. We also wanted to explore the various policy enablers through which governments can support community work.

Action for Neighbourhood Change, by contrast, had a different starting point. Unlike Vibrant Communities, the federal government itself initiated the ANC project. The policy dialogue effectively had a *de facto* membership by virtue of the way in which the project had been established – i.e., five distinct government sponsors. Representatives from the national sponsors and the five selected neighbourhoods also participate in the policy dialogue.

While there has been some discussion about extending the membership of this core set of government partners, it is essential to ensure that the so-called 'group' actually sees itself as such. Reference to a group may imply more cohesion and coherence than, in fact, exists.

Although the five government sponsors had collaborated in developing the project, some had not seen a deeper or ongoing role for themselves beyond the initial conceptualization and financing. It will therefore be necessary to create a sense of collective commitment to the project and to establish the rationale for a continued working relationship.

Certain partners did not appear keen at first to participate in a continuing conversation. In fact, they seemed to prefer that the national and local organizations go off and implement their plans as identified in the approved submission. It is important to note that this preference does not signal a lack of interest in the project. Rather, it reflects the reality: Governments typically do not work in collaboration with their funded projects. A policy dialogue is not something in which government departments generally engage. Attempts to move in a new direction clearly require a shift in culture.

The first step is to create a group that feels and acts like a collaborative. Notwithstanding the participation of a core membership, the Vibrant Communities policy dialogue had been affected by considerable turnover among government participants [Leviten-Reid 2004]. The turnover resulted largely from changes in staff assignments. We decided that for future initiatives of this kind, departments would be asked to make a firm commitment of personnel and to ensure consistent participation.

We see the ANC policy dialogue not as a disparate set of government sponsors that simply have pooled their money for a common purpose. Rather, it is a group with the potential to bring about important changes in government by virtue of working together. For this reason, the membership is not as fluid or open as it had been with our previous experience. Participation is not on an as-you-like-it or if-you-happen-to-be-available-for-lunch-on-that-day basis. There is an *expectation* that the government sponsors will participate.

To reinforce this expectation, a designated time has been set for the meetings over the coming year. Policy dialogues will be held for a two-hour period in the afternoon of the second Tuesday of every month. Those unable to attend at the scheduled time will be encouraged to send a replacement from their unit. Unlike the Vibrant Communities former policy dialogue, intentional learning within government was an objective set out in the call for proposals − with policy dialogue as the identified mechanism. Sharing within departments is critical for this learning.

The possibility of broadening the membership of the initial group to include representatives from other departments has been considered. The advantage is that additional government departments would be involved in understanding and ideally supporting community efforts. The challenge is that it takes time to forge a genuine working relationship. Expanding the membership may mean continually revisiting issues and concerns that already have been considered.

For the purposes of the ANC project, the membership will not be extended (if at all) until the original members have consolidated their efforts. It is felt that this first step is essential in order to move along the continuum from the sharing of information toward the resolution of common problems.

The potential involvement of representatives from provincial and local governments in these discussions also has been discussed. The Vibrant Communities policy dialogue made an effort to do this where appropriate. As noted, representatives

from the statistical agency in Newfoundland had been invited to make a presentation on the provincial system of Community Accounts.

But in addition to engaging provincial and municipal delegates in policy dialogue sessions at the national level, the process itself can be employed by local organizations as a means of engaging community groups and appropriate government representatives around issues of common concern. As noted, groups in Calgary have employed this methodology around the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program.

For ANC, policy dialogue at the local level might be more effective if membership changed according to the problems being addressed. We cannot assume that the same people will be able to resolve every policy question.

Ideally for ANC, a small core group affiliated with a local initiative would be designated by the coordinating body in the selected neighbourhoods to ensure continuity of the process and linkages across policy areas. Specific membership would vary by issue. In order to be effective, some kind of coaching support may be required to help root the local policy work within the appropriate jurisdictional and legislative frameworks.

## ii. Time constraints

Given the work demands of all involved in the ANC, it is essential to sustain participation in the policy dialogue throughout the initiative. Time constraints are a real concern for this type of process.

One of the lessons from Vibrant Communities was that 90 minutes is not sufficient time for a meeting that seeks to update participants about the progress of the project, share information and find solutions to administrative problems that communities identify. At the same time, we learned that time is a scarce commodity and must be judiciously used.

We are hoping that a structured dialogue, hosted by a facilitator who is an integral part of the ANC project, will create both the learning opportunity and the space for collaboration and joint problem solving. We decided to maintain a 90-minute time frame in respect of the heavy workload of participants but to limit the reporting component of each meeting as well as the number of subjects to be considered overall.

A decision was made to shape the policy dialogue work plan on the basis of the interests and concerns identified first by the government partners and then by representatives of the five selected neighbourhoods. To help establish priority areas for discussion, individual interviews were held with each of the five government sponsors. They were asked to state their hopes and expectations for the ANC project along with

areas worth exploring over the longer term.  Each interview was documented as a set of notes, which were sent to interviewees prior to distribution to the other participants.

The notes subsequently were collated into a summary document that reflected the collective interests of the project sponsors with respect to the policy dialogue.  A working agenda was prepared by consolidating the diverse opinions.  It effectively has evolved into a work plan with a proposed set of topics for the next 12 months.  They include government-to-government collaboration, government-to-community collaboration, evaluation, funding, skills and qualities required for government-community collaboration, and learning tools that may support this work.

### iii. Scaling up and out

In addition to the policy dialogue that Caledon is hosting, there is a parallel process now under way in government.  The Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Housing and Homelessness, convened a related policy discussion involving senior officials in a discussion about Action for Neighbourhood Change in particular and neighbourhood revitalization more generally.

At the first meeting, an estimated 20 people attended from a wide range of government departments, including Human Resources and Skills Development, Social Development, Health, Environment, Privy Council Office, the Cities and Communities Secretariat, the Federal Interlocutor's Office at Indian and Northern Affairs, Justice, Heritage, Industry, Environment and Statistics Canada.  Several participants were at the ADM level while others sent delegates to represent them.  This mix reflects a reality in government − it is unlikely that ADMs from all invited departments will be together in one room at the same time.  But at least they will be briefed on the initiative and on neighbourhood issues more generally.

A few key points emerged from this initial ADM discussion.  Participants recognized that there is now an expectation in government for various departments − as well as branches and units within departments − to work horizontally around projects of common interest as a matter of good practice.

It also was acknowledged that such a dialogue process can help identify inappropriate duplication.  For example, two departments may be providing funding to the same or similar groups in a given community for almost identical purposes.

One participant raised a different but related concern.  Even a seemingly positive development inadvertently can create a problem.  She noted, for example, that the new Youth Justice Renewal Act seeks to employ alternatives to the youth correctional system.  But a negative unexpected outcome of this approach is that youth experiencing trouble with the law are left more frequently without adequate shelter and end up in transitional homeless shelters without the ongoing supports they require.

At the substantive level, government representatives at the ADM meeting hoped that selected neighbourhoods within the ANC process would include in their respective revitalization processes some dimension of employment and literacy. It also was noted that there may be some promising links with related government efforts, such as the social economy initiative.

A suggestion was made about the possibility of involving neighbourhood representatives in local discussions related to the New Deal on Cities and Communities announced in the 2005 federal Budget. Tripartite agreements focused on municipal issues typically have involved only governments with no engagement of communities.

Several participants made reference to relevant tools currently being developed in government − e.g., information on housing affordability being designed by the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development in conjunction with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Reference was made to Statistics Canada's work on neighbourhood indicators as well as work by Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada on crime prevention indicators.

As a follow-up to the meeting, the Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Housing and Homelessness, invited these government representatives to consider participating in an ongoing federal Working Group on Neighbourhood Change. This type of continuing discussion would help support efforts at the neighbourhood level. One of the clear lessons from the Vibrant Communities policy dialogue was that discussion at senior levels of government is essential. Policy dialogues will never be able to move beyond the sharing of information toward the consolidation of procedures or the resolution of problems in the absence of these higher-level discussions.

Participants in the former policy dialogue were keen to see changes that would make government administrative procedures more supportive and respectful of communities and voluntary organizations. Yet they felt that it was difficult for them to formulate new processes in the absence of approval from higher ranks.

It would not have been possible, for example, for participants to employ a common evaluation framework across departments; they could only suggest the possibility and work on its common elements. Application of a new cross-departmental approach went well beyond their mandate. But they were in a position to play a crucial role − channelling information and ideas to more senior decision-makers.

### iv. Content

It is clear that considerable time has been spent on process − or the 'how' of these meetings. This focus reflects a deep desire to get it right in order to ensure that participants stay at the table. But this focus stems as well from the fact that there are no

precedents upon which to build in terms of government-community dialogue. There is a lot to figure out with respect to planning an effective mechanism.

Government departments talk to and with each other (on occasion and certainly not enough). But they rarely work together deliberatively and explicitly on a given project over a sustained period of time and they never work with representatives from community groups in that way. The challenge is to create a process that will meet the purposes of the work as well as ensure ongoing participation and commitment.

Once a comfortable format is established, the plan for the ANC policy dialogue is to move quickly into substantive areas of discussion. At this level, there are three possible streams of content.

The first focuses upon the policy domains that relate to the revitalization of neighbourhoods − e.g., the new affordable housing agreement that the federal government recently signed with Ontario or the Early Learning and Child Care Agreements which the federal government has signed over the past few weeks with Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.

Political arrangements, such as federal-provincial/territorial agreements in key social policy areas, are determined and negotiated at senior levels of government. But the implementation details of such agreements always need to be worked out and acted upon. A policy dialogue can create the important space for relevant partners to determine how to translate political agreements into concrete action.

Another more 'upstream' role for policy dialogue is to enable government partners to have input into the substance and design of potential political agreements by identifying the various linkages across discrete policy domains. The agreement ideally could reflect a more comprehensive approach to a given issue if there were sustained opportunities for these kinds of discussion in government.

The second possible stream of substantive discussion focuses upon the specific project that brought the players together in the first place − in this case, the ANC. At the very least, the policy dialogue will provide for project updates. But as noted, a decision was made to keep this reporting to a minimum so as to allow time for discussion of key issues, such as the expectations of the partners financing this work.

As noted, individual interviews were held with each partner to identify the objectives that they wished to see achieved through the project. Even though the partners had come together to support a common effort on neighbourhood revitalization, it was of interest that they differed somewhat in their expectations.

In being asked to articulate the desired outcomes of the project, several noted that the process of revitalizing communities went beyond their individual mandates and potentially could look different from the specific work in which they were directly involved. Others, by contrast, said that they needed to see their own mandates, such as

literacy interventions, drug prevention strategies and learning technologies, reflected somehow in the local work − whether in all or in selected neighbourhoods.

The third major stream of possible content for discussion focuses upon the consolidation of government procedures and the removal of administrative barriers that make it difficult for community groups to do their work. The agenda of the ANC policy dialogue does make time for exploring the improvement and possible consolidation of selected government procedures.

One of the early sessions will consider the challenges that the various sponsors faced in consolidating their diverse funding streams into a common project. Participants will be asked to identify the various steps that had to be taken in order to effect the joint funding agreement now in place.

In addition, a joint evaluation process will be employed for the project. The work of the five neighbourhoods involved in the ANC will be assessed according to a common framework. The government sponsors will be working with representatives from the national sponsoring organizations and the five communities to help develop this framework.

Members of the policy dialogue will also be made aware of concerns being raised by community-based groups, not necessarily involved with the ANC project, around extensive government expectations related to application procedures, reporting requirements and evaluation. Government processes in these areas often destabilize small organizations and can even threaten their existence. This destabilization can have a significant impact upon neighbourhoods and the availability of supports and services.

For example, each government department has its own application processes for various community projects. Some departments impose particularly severe administration and reporting requirements. A number of community groups have documented their concerns about the micro-management practices that Human Resources and Skills Development Canada employs for some of the projects it supports.

The extensive documentation requirements typically create a significant paper burden for groups, few of which have sufficient resources for this purpose. In future, it is likely that only large organizations or private consulting firms will be able to compete for government grants, thereby excluding many organizations (typically small voluntary groups) equally well equipped to deliver these services. In fact, the practice appears to contravene the spirit of the Voluntary Sector Initiative, whose purpose was to enhance relationships between government and voluntary organizations.

Many groups that do manage to secure government contracts have expressed concern about the administrative burden embedded in the accountability requirements. The extent of reporting virtually calls for micro-management – generally at the cost of diverting scarce resources from the primary task being supported, whether training the unemployed, setting up community businesses or reducing poverty.

It is possible that ongoing policy dialogue would help resolve some of these issues. At the very least, it creates a space where these and similar concerns might be raised. Right now, there is no machinery that permits this kind of sustained discussion and that adds to the body of knowledge regarding effective collaboration between government and communities.

While the ANC policy dialogue may address these issues at some point, it has not been constructed as a general discussion about government. Its purpose is to focus upon the specific concerns − which may or may not correspond to those identified here − of the neighbourhoods and organizations involved in the project. Their concerns will become clearer as the work unfolds and the selected neighbourhoods begin to carry out their respective revitalization efforts.


### *All this to say…..*

Policy dialogue enables participants from different perspectives to raise concerns and resolve identified problems. While the process does not guarantee the resolution of these issues, it serves an important function by providing a venue where these at least can be flagged and discussed. It convenes a process involving players who are both knowledgeable and have some capacity to act on these concerns by raising awareness within the broader government system.

The challenge for the ANC policy dialogue is to build sufficient trust in order to create a working team. Over time, it is hoped that the team members can move from the sharing of information and expectations to working on the possible consolidation of government procedures and joint problem solving. Neighbourhoods need some evidence that their concerns have been heard. Their messages also need to reach beyond the sponsors of the project to central agencies like Treasury Board and the Privy Council Office.

While this effort may focus explicitly upon the work of the ANC, its results could have implications that go well beyond the scope of the project. The five participating neighbourhoods – in Halifax, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Regina and Surrey – could serve as an important test case for far broader change in government-community relations.

**Endnote**

1. The following papers were produced for the Vibrant Communities project. They can be found at *www.caledoninst.org:*

*Comprehensive Community Initiatives* – Discusses the major concepts and practices associated with comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction.

*Who Does What in Comprehensive Community Initiatives?* – Considers the role that various sectors play in comprehensive community initiatives, including governments, social services, business, labour, educational institutions and people living in poverty.

*The Social Role of Local Government* – Explores the specific contribution that local governments can make to such initiatives, including a discussion of seven possible roles: exemplary employer, service provider, investor, leader, champion, convener and partner.

*Community Renewal* – Examines the renewal of communities through rethinking how community resources are used and how they can be combined more effectively to achieve mutually reinforcing results.

*Innovation and Poverty Reduction* – Explores the concept of innovation and its relationship to the practice of community-based poverty reduction.

*Learning and Evaluation for Poverty Reduction* – Examines the process of community learning, including learning-oriented evaluation with particular reference to the Vibrant Communities experience.

*Culture and Recreation: Links to Well-being* – Discusses the importance of culture and recreation for the health and well-being of individuals and communities, arguing that they represent key aspects of social infrastructure.

*Reflections on Vibrant Communities* – Reflects on the first 18 months of Vibrant Communities' activities in order to capture key lessons and observations from its early days.

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