



**CALEDON**  
INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL POLICY

## **Policies that Build Community**

*by*

**Sherri Torjman**

**September 2014**

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## *What Is Policy?*

Thank you for the invitation to participate in this national gathering. I was asked to focus my remarks today on the policy dimensions of building community. I would first like to say a few words about policy before proceeding to talk about its role in building (caring) community.

There is often confusion about the meaning of policy. When some people hear the word “policy,” they think police. Here is the government telling me, yet again, where to go and what to do.

Other people think of policy as marketing.<sup>1</sup> In their view, it’s all about selling an idea. And to some extent, that’s true. There *is* an important marketing aspect to policy work. But you first have to develop the idea and design its components. You need to figure out the product before you can sell it. Only then can you make the case for supporting a given policy – whether the goal is poverty reduction, neighbourhood revitalization or welfare reform, to name just a few important areas of concern.

I have worked with certain colleagues who say that they “don’t do policy” (read: please don’t bother me with it). But the fact is that public policy is hard to ignore.

Public policy determines the quality of the air we breathe and the water we drink. It affects the food we eat – how it is harvested, where it is distributed and sold, and how much we pay. It controls the way in which we clean and monitor the safety of the water supply.

Transportation is another example of a domain governed by various public policies, most of which are concerned with traveller safety. Public policy also regulates the airwaves by way of licensing. It determines the components of Canada’s tax regime – which combines income, sales and payroll taxes – and their respective levels and purposes.

Social policy – a significant dimension of public policy – plays a vital role in Canada’s society and economy through such programs as child benefits and child care, Employment Insurance, elderly benefits and welfare. Medicare serves as the bedrock of Canadian public policy.

These are just a few examples of how public policy affects us both profoundly and pervasively. It touches virtually every aspect of our lives.

Regardless of domain, public policy can be understood as a deliberate and carefully chosen set of actions that are intended to protect the public interest and to tackle pressing public concerns. At its core, policy development involves the identification of a desired objective and the formulation of the most effective and practicable route(s) to attain that goal.

While governments play the primary role in public policy development, the process of formulating policy is not unique to government. Think about your own organization. There is likely a set of human resource policies that outline the conditions of your employment related to wages, benefits, hours, statutory holidays and, in certain cases, pensions.

## What is policy?

- **Carefully chosen** set of actions
- Designed to protect **the public interest**
- Helps tackle **key public problems**
- Not just a **“government thing”**

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Private businesses also formulate policies regarding their employment practices as well as their community relationships. Many companies have developed corporate social responsibility guidelines to shape their charitable giving.

All organizations operate on the basis of a set of policies. You don't need government to create policies. But you *do* need government to create *public policies* because these affect an entire community, province or territory, or the country as a whole.

In fact, you can understand policies that build community as a cup of coffee (I thought that would be an appropriate analogy for early morning!). Policy is both cup and coffee.

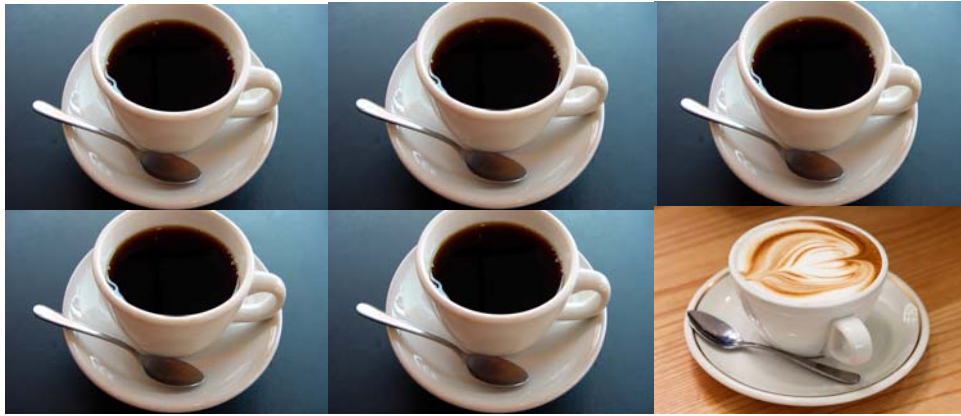
You can't drink coffee without some form of cup or container. You can't have a country, province/territory or community without identified borders and boundaries as well as rules that shape the way in which we behave as citizens.

At the same time, you can't drink coffee if your cup is empty. You need something in that cup. Similarly, a country, province/territory and community all have various programs, services and benefits that serve the public interest.

So public policy is both cup and coffee. It is both *context* and *content*. I will be focusing upon both core components in considering policies that support the building of community.



## The brew



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[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/45/A\\_small\\_cup\\_of\\_coffee.JPG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/45/A_small_cup_of_coffee.JPG) latte theselby.com

## *Building Community*

While there are many interventions that build community, they can be understood as falling within the two main categories related to creating the appropriate context and content. The appropriate *context* involves designing for well-being. The appropriate *content* focuses primarily upon how we care for each other.



Designing a good mug = designing for well-being

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Creating a good brew = creating caring community

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***Context: Designing for well-being***

The first component of building community involves creating the coffee cup. It means designing the context and spaces that enable community members to spend time together and to participate as active members. It is based on principles related to clean and green places, mixed use, accessibility and engagement.

Designing a new mug



Clean and green

Mixed use

Accessible

Engaging

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## *Clean and green*



The first step in designing for well-being is to ensure clean air and water. Building a sense of community can take place only within a healthy environment. In fact, much of the improvement in health over the past 150 years is attributable to public health policies in the form of sewage treatment, vaccination and clean water.

Unfortunately, public policy sometimes fails in this capacity – often with dire and fatal consequences. The Walkerton tragedy in May 2000, for example, resulted from a serious failure to monitor adequately the quality of the local water supply [Torjman 2000].

A related aspect of context involves the colour of the coffee cup. It should include many shades of green. Building community is predicated upon a clean environment and lots of green space with neighbourhood parks, untouched forests and walkable trails.

A research project sponsored by Siemens created a Green City Index that ranked 27 major Canadian and American cities from best to worse. The assessment was based on nine evaluation criteria: CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, land use, energy, buildings, air, transport, water, waste and environmental governance [Siemens 2011].

Of the 27 cities evaluated, Calgary ranked 14<sup>th</sup> overall and first in water management. Ottawa placed 12<sup>th</sup> because of its green space, good public transit and low CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Toronto did even better in ninth spot with relatively low CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and per person energy consumption, and good

recycling practices. Vancouver ranked second and was named the greenest city in Canada with high-quality air, and good land use practices and waste management.

In fact, Vancouver has approved an Action Plan to become the *greenest city in the world* and, in June 2014, received the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' Green Champion Award. The City of Edmonton's environmental strategic plan, *The Way We Green*, received the 2012 Environment Award from the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators.

Some local governments clearly are getting it right by introducing green plans and practices that seek continually better environmental outcomes. These initiatives include not only their direct actions but also their purchasing practices to ensure that they green the entire supply chain. Every community ideally should strive to become the greenest city or town in the world, setting for themselves the highest possible benchmarks that they strive to achieve.

Clean and green spaces are important not just for physical health. There is a growing body of literature on the links between access to nature and mental health in particular. In the book *The Nature Principle: Human Restoration and the End of Nature Deficit Disorder*, author Richard Louv argues that urban living has become too detached from nature. He describes how tapping into the restorative powers of the natural world can boost mental acuity and creativity, promote health and wellness, and build stronger businesses and communities [Louv 2011].

The UK government has initiated exemplary work in this regard. It introduced a national strategy called PlayEngland whose purpose is to encourage local authorities to embed green and innovative design in local play areas. The program puts forward a set of guidelines only; it is not a statutory provision. Funds are made available – an average £1.1 million to every top-tier local authority – to encourage the creative development of outdoor public play space. The approach is concerned less with play structures and formal programs, and far more with how green play spaces are designed and embedded in local neighbourhoods.

PlayEngland recently announced its collaboration with a group of leading organizations to “kick-start a revolution” that will reconnect kids with nature through a pioneering movement called The Wild Network. The network was founded by a diverse group dedicated to getting children in touch with nature and outdoor play.

This approach is especially important for Canada. In its annual *Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth*, Active Healthy Kids Canada pointed out that this country ranked poorly relative to other nations. It called for more active outdoor, unstructured play for Canadian children [Active Healthy Kids Canada 2014].

Green communities tend to be concerned with walkability, which is vital for both physical and mental health. But the benefits of walking go even further. A recent study by Stanford University researchers found clear links between walking and creative thinking [Oppezzo and Schwartz 2014]. Physical activity literally gets the creative juices flowing. Walkability helps make possible another important component of community design: mixed use.

## Clean and green

- Become the **greenest city** in the world
- Green your **purchasing practices**
- Create nature-based **play** spaces

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### *Mixed use*



Jane Jacobs' work on urban design eloquently made the case for mixed-use communities that combine live, work and play. This design involves a blend of housing, workplaces and shops to buy food and other essentials – ideally within walking distance or at least short travel [Jacobs 1961].

Neighbourhoods should be designed – or redesigned if necessary – with the walkability factor in mind. Some cities have introduced a scoring system in which neighbourhoods are ranked on the

basis of their walkability to vital amenities like parks, schools and local markets. Bikeability is an equally desirable goal with neighbourhood indices emerging to track this factor as well.

Mixed-use communities also tend to be safer. There are more public places – or at least places where you can be seen in public. This means more “eyes on the street,” a concept developed by Jane Jacobs [1961]. There tend to be fewer crimes against people and property in the presence of an informal neighbourhood watch.

### Mixed Use

- Vital amenities within **walking** distance
- Mixed-use communities promote **social proximity**
- More “**eyes** on the street”

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### Accessible

The map displays a university campus with various buildings and streets. A legend in the top right corner identifies accessibility features: a wheelchair icon for 'Wheelchair Accessible Entrance', a blue wheelchair icon for 'Accessible Parking', and a blue ramp icon for 'Accessible ramps'. Numerous blue icons are scattered across the campus map, indicating these features at various locations. Labeled buildings include Northdale, St. Michael's Campus, Paterson Building, School of Business & Economics, Arts 'C' Wing, Arts 'L' Wing, Dr. Abin Woods Building, Fred Nichols Campus Centre, Macdonald House, Little House, Alumni Hall, Euloe, Leppold, Bricker, Bricker Academic, Science Building, Conrad Hall, Athletics Complex, John Aird Centre, Theatre Hall, and 202 Regina. Streets shown include Albert Street, Herlock Street, Hickory Street, Balsam Avenue, Hazel Street, University Avenue, King Street North, Regina Street, Lodge Street, Marshall Street, Bricker Avenue, and Seacorn Drive. A north arrow is also present.

### Accessible

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Photo: web.wlu.ca

While walkability contributes to physical and mental health, it also translates into a smaller ecological footprint. But walkability is possible only up to a point. In both larger urban centres and rural communities, it is often a challenge to get from here to there. Accessible public transit is an essential piece of the building community puzzle.

Accessible public transit is a significant policy challenge not just in this country but in all major cities and regions throughout the world. Fortunately, Canada has a few good examples in this domain, including the City of Montréal. In 2010, the American Public Transportation Association named the *Société de transport de Montréal* as Outstanding Public Transportation System in North America and, in June 2014, awarded it Gold Level distinction for its sustainability commitment.

Accessible public transit is a long-term objective that requires a multi-billion investment over many years. In the meantime, several measures can be introduced to improve access. Local transit systems, for example, can be better integrated. The cities of Kitchener and Waterloo amalgamated their respective transit systems into a more coherent region-wide approach, replacing the two independent systems that had run side by side in these contiguous areas.

While not a public transit system, Community CarShare is another good example of improving local access to transportation. Founded in 1998 in Kitchener-Waterloo, Community CarShare is a non-profit co-operative that provides its members access to vehicles on a self-serve, pay-per-use basis. Its mission is to promote carsharing as a vital component of a sustainable transportation system. The co-op subsequently added service in the cities of Hamilton in 2009; Elmira, Guelph and St. Catharines in 2013; and London in 2014.

Rural communities face unique distance challenges. Several years ago, Niagara Regional Government set up a special pilot project to bridge the wide spaces between parts of that community. It convened transit authorities, private transportation companies, community agencies, local government and job seekers to solve the can't-get-there-from-here problem. Together they devised a Job Bus that linked training, employment and child care for job seekers, nearly one-third of whom received some form of pension or social assistance.

But physically getting around a neighbourhood or region is only part of the building community equation. Some residents face additional barriers, often in the form of physical obstacles, which exclude them from participation.

As the population ages, barrier-free design has become an increasingly urgent imperative. In 2006, the World Health Organization spearheaded the Global Age-Friendly Cities initiative in which 33 cities, including four Canadian municipalities – Saanich, Portage la Prairie, Sherbrooke and Halifax – took part. Inclusive design is essential not only for persons with disabilities but for all community members, including parents pushing strollers, residents riding bikes and older people with mobility impairments.

The province of Ontario has assumed an active leadership role with respect to reducing barriers. It has enacted legislation that requires municipalities, businesses and voluntary organizations to meet designated standards of accessibility. The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* sets out the goal of an accessible Ontario by 2025. The Act employs the same definition of disability as the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, which includes both visible and hidden disabilities.

Proposed changes to the *Community Planning Act* in New Brunswick will help modernize and enhance accessibility building standards. The amendments will make mandatory the adoption of the Barrier-Free Design Building Code for new construction province-wide. The regulations will require newly-constructed buildings to be more accessible in parking areas, entrances, washrooms, signage, exterior walks, doorways, doors, counters and shelving.

Local governments can also provide important leadership. The City of Vancouver, for example, announced in November 2013 a new regulation on accessible construction. It applies to *all* new home construction and renovations, and not just public buildings. Mandatory accessibility features now include wider doors, hallways and stairs, and lever handles on all doors and plumbing fixtures.

Governments can also make available grants or loans for retrofit. For example, the Home Adaptations for Seniors Independence Program, cost-shared between the federal and provincial governments, makes available forgivable loans to homeowners and landlords for major repairs, accessibility modifications or the creation of secondary/garden suites. Ottawa provides forgivable loans up to a maximum \$3,500 for accessibility adaptations to homes on reserve.

However, adaptation and retrofit often involve extensive and expensive modifications. It is best, where possible, to design for accessibility right from the get-go.

Despite the wide-ranging work required to reduce and ideally remove physical barriers, the most difficult obstacles to overcome are invisible. They involve negative attitudes and the assumption of inability because of some type of functional limitation. The best way to tackle attitudinal barriers is to ensure that people get to know each other and experience first-hand the strengths and assets that they previously could not (or would not) see. Social inclusion is the most effective way to overcome these attitudinal barriers.

## Accessible

- Design for **inclusion**
- Design for the person with the **stroller**
- Require accessible **construction** and provide funding for retrofit

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## Engaging



Social inclusion is not just about going somewhere or doing something. It also involves creating opportunities for individuals to participate meaningfully in their community and to express their thoughts about the issues that affect their lives.

Governments often believe they are *engaging* citizens by *consulting* them on various public concerns. But there is a significant difference between these two functions. The former involves presenting a set of predetermined options for citizen feedback. While important, consultation often takes place *after* key choices are already made. Community members are asked to select their preference from two or three selected options.

Engagement, by contrast, involves the active participation of community members in the formulation of possible responses. It is concerned more about reaching out to residents and listening to their views – even asking them what solutions they would suggest rather than presenting them with a limited selection of prospective answers. Ideally, it means engaging residents in formulating the appropriate *questions* to consider.

Local governments, in particular, can enable engagement by creating safe spaces for community conversations. There are many ways to hear citizen voice – including traditional methods such as roundtables, town hall meetings and personal interviews. There is also an emerging world of possibilities rooted in the widespread use of social technologies.

But there are many non-traditional methods for capturing community voice. These include art drawn by elementary school students, photos taken by youth in middle or high school, and essays written by university students as part of their course work. Visual representation of concepts is helpful for people who may have difficulty with written expression or for those for whom English or French is not a first language.

The South East Ottawa Photovoice Project is one example. Youth in the neighbourhood were asked to take pictures of things in their neighbourhood that had meaning for them. They were asked to identify what needs to be preserved and what needs to change.

Along with the positive photos came some startling snapshots of rusty playground equipment and gaping holes on the basketball court – large enough for stuck feet and broken ankles. These images were so powerful that one city official promised, after a public montage of the photos, to replace the playground equipment and repair the courts the following day.

The Photovoice project was also a constructive way to engage young people and new Canadians who typically do not play an active role in community decisions. Traditional processes can be intimidating. Sometimes meetings are convened in venues, like boardrooms or City Council chambers, which are unfamiliar to many in the community. The formal procedures of such meetings as well as the style of discussion can create barriers to participation. Some communities have organized special groups of low-income residents who act as a sounding board for local initiatives.

Barriers to participation can also be reduced by providing supervised child care during community meetings, food if these meetings are held at or near meal time, or a small payment to cover travel and child care costs. The availability at selected meetings of language and sign interpreters can encourage the participation of new Canadians and persons with hearing impairments, respectively.

Another way to connect with citizens is to reach out to them – to bring the city to the people. Vancouver provides a good example of a city moving in that direction. On May 8, 2014, it launched the Pop-Up City Hall program, a mobile City Hall that provides easy access to key municipal services in various neighbourhoods. Residents can:

- pick up a blue box, recycling bag or collection calendar
- register to vote
- get a bike or Stanley Park map
- sign up for emergency planning courses or the Vancouver Volunteer Corps
- learn about City of Vancouver job opportunities and recreational programs
- get updates on public consultations in their neighbourhood.

Finally, there is groundbreaking work taking place throughout the world that is moving toward the co-construction of public policy. In Québec, work has been under way for years on the co-construction of policy and practice related to the social economy in particular [Chamberlain et al. 2011]. The government is just one actor – and not even the primary player – in formulating the relevant foundation and framework for this practice. The co-construction principle can be applied to all aspects of designing for well-being.

Engaging

- Multiple, **creative** ways of providing feedback
- **Reach out** to citizens
- **Co-construct** policy with citizens

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### Summary

All orders of government and local governments, in particular, can take a range of actions to design for well-being. They can introduce public policies that:

- challenge themselves to become the greenest community in the world in both their direct actions and purchasing policies
- introduce zoning that requires mixed use of neighbourhood/community space

- require accessible design in all new construction and make available funds for retrofit of existing facilities
- engage community members in co-constructing local policies that design for well-being.

### Local governments can

- Become the **greenest city** in the world
- Introduce **zoning for mixed use**
- Require **accessible design** and fund retrofit
- **Engage**, not just consult!

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#### *Content: Caring for each other*

The second component of building community involves creating a good brew. It means supporting the various ways in which we care for each other. Governments fund a wide range of services focused on formal supports.

Today, I would like to talk about building community through the equally important informal types of care involving families, friends and neighbours. These include personal communities, circles of support, long dinner tables and community celebration.

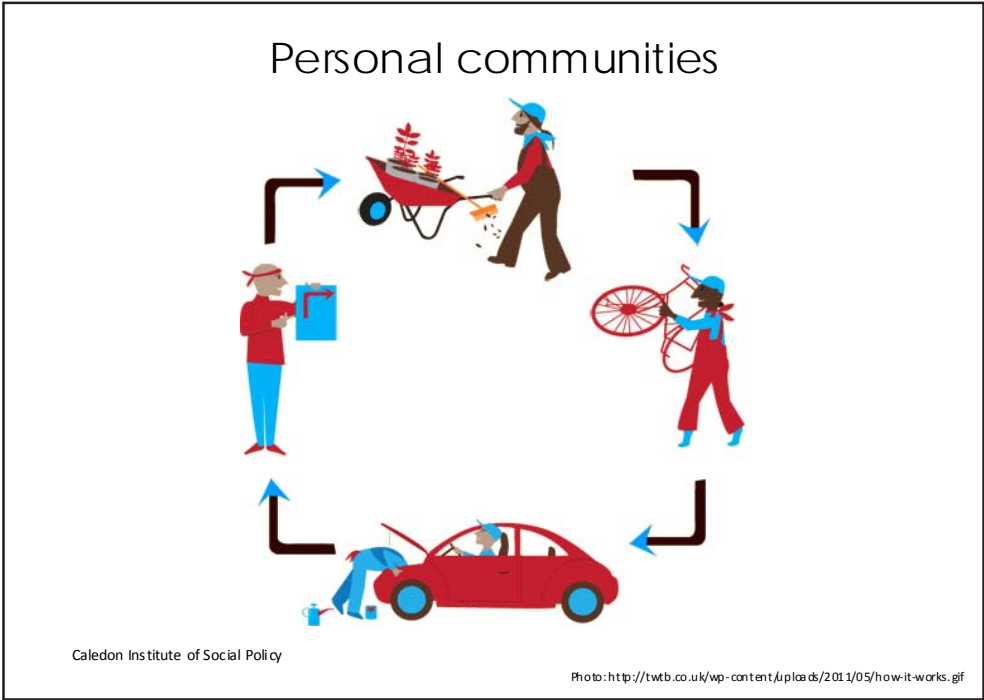
# Brew a good brew



- Personal communities
- Circles of support
- Long dinner tables
- Community celebration

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## Personal communities



One of the most pressing challenges that communities face is to shore up the supports made available to families with young children. Being a parent – while joyous – can be tough and exhausting. Families with higher incomes can afford to buy some relief. They can hire a nanny or call a babysitter and take off a few hours. They can register their children in preschool programs, often at a price that rivals university education. Many families don't have that luxury outside the occasional outing.

Communities need to think about various ways to build flexible and caring supports around parents from the birth of their children until they become young adults. I am not referring here to counselling and formal services once family breakdown has occurred or a serious mental health problem has presented itself. Rather, I am talking about natural, informal and affordable forms of care in which neighbours create circles of support around each other.

I know from personal experience how significant these supports can be. In my case, it came in the form of a drop-in centre for families with young children. We were new to the community (and to the city) with no family or friends living nearby.

The lifesaver was the local library. It made available a room on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings as a drop-in centre for parents and our very young children. There were chairs, a large sandbox with pails and shovels, and some toys and books scattered around. The drop-in literally was that: You dropped in whenever you could make it. There was no formal registration or starting time. You got there when you got there. There was no charge except \$.25 per person for juice and a snack.

That simple set-up was a welcome haven for so many young families. It helped create new friendships and enabled parents to share concerns about our children. The friendships continued outside the drop-in hours so that we began making child care arrangements with each other for short periods as required. We knew that the favour would always be repaid when the time arose.

But sometimes the mutual support went further. One day, I received a phone call from one of the drop-in mothers who said only this: "Do you want to prevent a meltdown?" My three-word response: "Bring her over." It sounds funny when I tell the story now but there was nothing funny about it at the time.

Many new parents experience exhaustion and, at some point, may feel overwhelmed. The problem is that there is often no place to turn – or at least to turn for help right away when that breaking point feels close by. There may be a nearby family service centre or visiting public health nurse but there is usually a wait time of days or even weeks for an appointment. There typically is no community space for immediate support or assistance.

Besides, this particular mother didn't require counselling. She just needed some relief from a very stressful day. Thankfully, our little network was there to help. We acted as an informal but trusted personal safety net, and there is no greater feeling of security than that.

In fact, one of the group members decided to take this support network one step further and created a babysitting co-op involving mothers whom she had met at the drop-in centre. A co-op member would call the coordinator, and identify the date and time during which babysitting was required. The coordinator would log into a central registry the number of babysitting hours that had been allocated to the caller, who then owed that time to the group.

The idea of creating a pool of supports has been extended in some communities to include other applications, such as an entire roster of services that residents can barter. This model builds on John McKnight's powerful concept of community assets. John has argued eloquently over the years that everyone has assets, talents and skills. Every single person has something unique and valuable to offer. When these talents and skills are pooled into a community inventory, together they comprise a rich roster of resources [McKnight and Block 2010].

At a community building conference, I once heard a woman talk about her difficulties finding work. She described her circumstances as "cash poor." She could barely pay for the essentials of food, shelter and clothing, let alone the so-called extras of diapers, home repairs and transportation in a large urban centre. Fortunately, she happened to hear about a network of residents in similar circumstances who had set up a goods and services exchange.

This woman initially felt that she had little to offer the network – she knew only what she needed to 'buy.' After some thought, she realized she had a range of skills that others wanted to 'purchase': editing résumés, typing, babysitting, caring for pets, and driving for medical appointments and grocery shopping. She began to 'sell' these skills to various members of the network who, in turn, paid back through plumbing repairs, house painting and an environmentally-friendly diaper cleaning service.

Local service exchange is no replacement for decent employment wages or adequate income security. This discussion is not about abandoning a wage economy or reducing income programs, which ideally should be substantially boosted. But these types of community barter initiatives have had a profound impact upon many lives.

These networks provide access to essential goods and services for people unable to pay with cash. Informal trading systems also spawn new relationships and supports. The conference presenter described the case of a young man who shovelled snow for an elderly couple. He subsequently took personal interest in their well-being and phoned on a regular basis to inquire about their health.

Another woman who carpooled for that network met other young mothers with children of a similar age and they too started a babysitting exchange. Several members who used the environmentally-friendly diaper service were able to raise funds for expanding that business, which had been considered unbankable by local financial institutions.

Perhaps most important was the indirect impact of this community initiative. The rich inventory of goods and services that comprised the network helped members realize how very capable they are. They all have a range of skills seldom recognized or valued. Network participants were contributing

in their own small way to the well-being of other community members. They gained a new sense of self-worth – often stripped away when they are viewed as unemployable or unworthy of investment.

## Personal communities

- **Informal**, flexible supports
- Time and skills **exchange**
- Local assets as rich **inventory** of supports

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### *Circles of support*



Linked closely to personal communities is the explicit creation of circles of support. These typically are formed around individuals or families deemed to require additional assistance because of their personal or family circumstances.

Circles of support are actively employed, for example, in the disability community. A Canadian disability activist by the name of Judith Snow is widely recognized for articulating the concept and promoting its use in this country [see [www.judithsnow.org](http://www.judithsnow.org)]. Judith describes four different circles of relationships that everyone has in their lives.

The closest network is the *circle of intimacy* composed of people with whom we share intimacy, secrets and heartfelt emotions. The second *circle of friendship* involves people who are friends or relatives upon whom we call for social purposes – to go for dinner or see a movie. The third *circle of participation* refers to belonging and comprises the people with whom we participate in groups and organizations. The fourth *circle of exchange* is made up of people, such as doctors, teachers and other professionals, who are paid to be in our lives.

Judith argues that when we look at the four circles for people without disabilities, there are generally a fair number of people in each component. However, if we were to consider only the circles for people with disabilities, especially children, a very different pattern emerges.

People with disabilities usually engage with circles one and four. In fact, circle four typically is filled with people paid to be in their lives. The key participation circle, by contrast, has few organizations or social opportunities. Most persons with disabilities are excluded from creating connections and developing friendships. This exclusion also puts a large financial and emotional burden on families.

Organizations like the Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network (PLAN) have spearheaded the Belonging Initiative, a national collaboration to nurture belonging. Its goal is to nurture belonging and end isolation of persons with disabilities by fostering human connections. In the fall of 2014, PLAN is hosting an online course entitled “Weaving the Ties that Bind” to provide guidance around the development of personal networks and circles of support.

Family by Family in Australia is another example that employs circles of support – in this case, to help families struggling with various challenges. Created by the Australian Centre for Social Innovation, the initiative finds and trains families that are experiencing tough times. It pairs them with families that also seek to change their lives, and coaches both sets of households to grow and change together. The focus of support is upon the entire unit – not just upon the parents or a specific child identified as “the problem.” Professional coaches work behind the scenes, helping devise new approaches to the challenges that the families face.

The Australian approach is based on the principles of *co-production* in which citizens are involved in developing new human services approaches and of *co-design* in which local residents engage in designing, testing and spreading new solutions. The principles of co-production and

co-design also shape the work of a UK-based organization called Participle, which argues that public services are fundamentally out of step with the needs of the population.

In 2007, Participle developed the Circle initiative in partnership with 250 older people and their families. The participants said that they wanted three things: support with everyday tasks, social connections around interests and values (not age), and an opportunity to live life with a purpose and contribute to the community.

To date, seven circles have been initiated with more than 5,000 members. They participate in monthly events but also receive social and practical support around the home. Members shape the service by defining their own needs and aspirations while, at the same time, contributing their time and energy to providing practical assistance to others.

Circles of support are also helpful for informal caregivers who provide essential care to the elderly and persons with severe disabilities. While caregivers are not paid for their time and effort, they contribute the equivalent of part- or full-time jobs. They are involved in carrying out a wide range of caregiving tasks, usually with little assistance or relief.

A significant development in the caregiving field involves the use of new social technologies to create links among caregivers, care receivers and formal services. These networks provide information, emergency intervention and day-to-day assistance with caregiving tasks.

Tyze, for example, is a network-based approach supported through a unique computer software program. Tyze enables 'care receivers' and both their informal and formal caregivers to connect with each other on an ongoing basis and around the clock. It assures individuals that they are never alone. The network can be drawn upon for practical help, information, reassurance and support. Tyze may employ virtual space in the way it is organized but it is powerfully real in the vital supports it provides.

Governments can play an important role in enabling the creation of these circles of support. Governments can provide funding to local organizations that are spearheading new approaches to emotional care. The co-production and co-design of support services don't just happen on their own. They require core financing, coordination, expertise and technical support. This is a form of social infrastructure to which all orders of government should pay attention.

## Circles of support

- **Sustained** care and assistance
- **Belonging** through human connection
- **Co-production** of services

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### *The long dinner table*



The long dinner table approach is another way to foster the community capacity for care. This approach involves food, which is obviously essential for well-being. But it also plays a vital social and emotional role because it can act as a conduit for building social networks.

Paul Born refers frequently in his book to the role of the long dinner table and the influence it had on him over the years – and not just because he loves food! More importantly, the long dinner table symbolized safety and security for both his family and the larger Mennonite community of which he is a member. Its deeper symbolism certainly gives new meaning to the term ‘comfort food.’ In this case, comfort was afforded not so much by the food but by the people who are eating it – together [Born 2014].

I believe that communities can play a crucial role in creating long dinner tables that provide both social contact and affordable nutritious food. These ‘tables’ could be part of a community event, such as educational session, local speaker, performance, concert or celebration. Nutritious food would be made available to families at no charge.

The long dinner table approach is a way to build relationships and social networks, and to reduce reliance on food banks. While the latter are an invaluable resource, they were intended to act only as a last-resort safety net and not as the first line of defence that they have become.

Governments can help by introducing public policies that support this activity. For instance, provincial/territorial or municipal governments could designate a public body, such as a public health department, social service department or cultural ministry, to take responsibility for spearheading this initiative. The designated public body could allocate funds to groups in selected neighbourhoods or communities which, in turn, would determine the programming and raise funds through local sponsors to pay for the food, equipment or other modest costs associated with the slate of events.

There are many other actions that can be taken to enhance food security. The Toronto Food Policy Council is one example of a food security initiative that seeks to influence public policies related to local food production, distribution, access and affordability. The Council was established in 1991 as a subcommittee of the Board of Health to advise the City of Toronto on food policy issues.

## The long dinner table

- Relationships and **engagement**
- Creative **alternatives** to food banks
- Relationships and **food security**

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One of my favourite community celebrations in Ottawa is the annual Tulip Festival that takes place in May. It marks the end of what is always a long and tough winter, and is the kick-off event to welcome spring. Second, it is a physically beautiful celebration with thousands of tulips in flower beds that line the city and the banks of the Rideau Canal. Third, it marks a significant historic event in which Canada was especially helpful in saving the Dutch monarchy during World War II.

So there are many levels on which to appreciate this annual community festival. Over time, cultural components were added that include speakers, music, dance and international cuisine. As a family, we would attend regularly, along with thousands of other residents and tourists who come to enjoy the outdoors and the lively colours and cultures.

But one year, we arrived at the park where a major cultural festival usually was staged and realized immediately that something different. Unlike earlier years, there was a large fence encircling the grounds and guards were stationed at the gate. There was a big sign at the front entrance (there never used to be a front entrance – you could enter the park from anywhere) outlining the fee schedule.

All the arriving families decided, at that point, to turn away once we saw the substantial entry fee. That moment stays with me to this day. I was so upset that such a wonderful community event had become an exclusionary fundraiser. By the way, a few years later there was no more fence – and no more entry fee.

Community celebrations are for *everyone*. They are not just for the well-off. The whole point is to ensure that all residents can participate if they so choose. The power of these events is that they create both the space and spirit in which all are welcome – at no charge.

Community celebrations are about having fun. Public policy in the social arena typically focuses on employability and work. In fact, the current federal government casts virtually all initiatives under the umbrella of its Economic Action Plan. This framework considers both sides of the economic equation: helping Canadians upgrade their skills, and creating more and better job opportunities.

There is very little public policy talk about having fun – and how closely it links to individual and community well-being. Whether it is singing in choirs, cultural dance, playing on a sports team, painting the streets or beautifying the neighbourhood, we seriously undervalue the importance of these community activities. Yet these help create vital social networks and foster a sense of belonging.

## Community celebration

- **Glue** that strengthens the bonds of a community
- Cultural expression as a vital **economic** contributor
- **Fun** - the thing that policy forgot

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### *Summary*

All orders of government and local governments, in particular, can take a range of actions that enable our capacity to care for each other. They can introduce public policies that:

- make available public space, such as libraries, community centres and schools, for the creation of personal communities
- reconfigure the delivery of formal services toward the co-production and co-design of supports that actively engage community members in caring for each other
- create long dinner table initiatives that both build social networks and provide affordable nutritious food
- eliminate user fees for all community celebrations.

## Local governments can

- Make greater use of **public space** for creation of personal communities
- Embrace **co-production** to actively engage community members in the supports they need and want
- Enable **long dinner table** initiatives
- Eliminate user fees for **community celebration**

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### *The Big Policy Challenge*

Unfortunately, there is a fundamental problem that challenges our ability to put in place the policies related to both the context and content for building community. It has to do with broader governance and financing arrangements. Alan Broadbent explains this problem in his book *Urban Nation* [Broadbent 2008].

## The **elephant** in the room



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<http://www.awesomeinventions.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/elephant-mug.jpg>

## Elephant-sized barriers

- **Wide-ranging responsibilities** of local governments
- **Limited fiscal and governance capacity** relative to these responsibilities

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The current mechanism is in need of major repair. The problematic entry fees I described form the tip of a big fiscal iceberg. The foundational weakness derives from the limitations in municipal powers to raise and spend revenue, which are restricted by provincial legislation.

Municipalities have only limited sources of revenue. These include property tax, payments from higher levels of government in lieu of taxes, and fees from various sources such as development charges, permits, admissions and user fees (and parking tickets).

The limited fiscal capacity of local governments does not match their wide-ranging responsibilities. Not only do they need to invest in the various components of building community about which we have been speaking. They also face increasingly complex social problems like high poverty and growing inequality, homelessness and an aging population. Cities still carry much of the load for immigration, the environment, affordable housing, public health, accessibility, emergency preparedness and public security.

Even if local governments faced none of these challenges, they would still be grappling with pressures from the past. The physical hardware of the country – roads, sewers and bridges – is in serious need of upgrade and repair.

Several studies have identified a gaping municipal infrastructure deficit, which refers to the investments required to maintain and upgrade existing, municipally owned infrastructure assets. It also includes the funding needed over and above current and projected levels to bring existing facilities to a minimum acceptable level for operation through maintenance, rehabilitation, repairs and replacement [Mirza 2007: 7]. A report on the “coming collapse of Canada’s infrastructure” estimates the value of this deficit:

Canadian municipalities build, own and maintain most of the infrastructure that supports our economy and quality of life. Yet for the past 20 years, municipalities have been caught in a fiscal squeeze caused by growing responsibilities and reduced revenues. As a result, they were forced to defer needed investment, and municipal infrastructure continued to deteriorate, with the cost

of fixing it climbing five-fold from an estimated \$12 billion in 1985 to \$60 billion in 2003. This cost is the municipal infrastructure deficit, and today it has reached \$123 billion [Mirza 2007: 2].

The \$123 billion estimate includes “sub-deficits” for key categories of municipal infrastructure: water and waste water systems (\$31 billion); transportation (\$21.7 billion); transit (\$22.8 billion); waste management (\$7.7 billion); and community, recreational, cultural and social infrastructure (\$40.2 billion) [Mirza 2007: 2]. New infrastructure needs are an estimated \$115 billion [Vander Ploeg and Holden 2013: 7].

Cities require access to an ongoing revenue source, such as piggybacking on existing federal or provincial income taxes. Additional revenues would reduce reliance on property taxes, which are regressive and inherently flawed as an instrument for funding cities’ long-term needs. This big financing challenge needs an equally big solution. But in the meantime, there are some noteworthy developments on which to build.

## Foundations...the start of good design

- Federal **infrastructure** and gas tax funds
- Provincial **grants**
- Local **subsidies** for affordability

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In 2004, Ottawa agreed to rebate 100 percent of the GST that municipalities pay. One year later, it committed to share the Gas Tax Fund. A significant announcement was made in the 2007 federal Budget, which launched the Building Canada Plan – a seven-year plan providing \$33 billion in stable, flexible and predictable funding to provinces, territories and municipalities, allowing them to plan for the longer term and address their ongoing infrastructure needs. The \$33 billion included the existing municipal GST rebate, worth \$5.8 billion and the Gas Tax Fund, worth \$11.8 billion.

Budget 2013 introduced a Building Canada Plan worth a total \$53 billion, including \$47 billion in new funding over 10 years. It also announced permanent indexation of the \$2 billion Gas Tax Transfer.

Provincial governments have also made important recreational infrastructure investments. In September 2011, for example, BC announced \$30 million to communities to enable greater access to

recreation facilities. Eligible projects include sports and fitness facilities, community recreation spaces, trail and walkways, bike paths, playgrounds and other recreational areas. Priority was given to small communities, many of which lack the capacity to fund this infrastructure.

The problem in both cases is independence and flexibility. Cities need access to stable sources of revenue that will allow them to determine and pursue their own priorities. In June 2012, the Government of Alberta signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the cities of Edmonton and Calgary. It announced a commitment among the three governments to create a big-city charter and established a timeline for negotiations.

The purpose of this type of civic charter is to create a special agreement between a province and a designated city that separates the latter from the conventional municipal government act. The charter provides more autonomy for the city to set policies that meet its unique needs and gives it more tax-raising powers [Pue 2013].

Yet another financing option is to move away from the current federal preference for targeted tax reductions. Various 'boutique' tax cuts that have been introduced by the current federal government increase disposable income primarily for middle- and higher-income families – by reducing their tax burden. They afford little or no assistance to poor and modest-income families. The Children's Fitness Tax Credit, for example, cost an estimated \$115 million in 2013. These funds could have been better spent on infrastructure investments that benefit entire communities – not just in the activities of relatively well-off families that do not need such a tax break.

Neither can these measures substitute for investment in both the capital and operating components of a widely available program or service. In the case of recreation, in particular, families cannot possibly build and maintain through their individual contributions essential infrastructure such as parks, trails, fields, arenas, rinks and pools, and the training and payment of qualified staff.

While the larger financing issues are being sorted out, several municipalities have at least taken steps to make programs and services more affordable for individual households. In 2006, for example, the City of Calgary introduced a Fair Fares program to provide more affordable transit for all low-income residents. Calgary subsequently moved beyond transit to a broader affordability framework. In 2006, it passed the Fair Calgary Policy Framework (subsequently updated in 2008 and 2012) to apply the principle of affordability to a range of other services as well.

Affordability is particularly important when it comes to recreation – in light of the burgeoning evidence of the value of physical activity, in particular, at all stages of the life cycle. One public policy response is for municipalities to provide subsidies for participation in recreation and the arts.

The City of Hamilton, for example, introduced a Recreation Fee Assistance Program to provide residents living on low income the opportunity to participate in organized sports and recreation programs. It makes available a free family pass to the household's preferred recreation centre and fee assistance on City recreation programs to a maximum of \$150 value per child during a

12-month period. It also allows 50 percent fee assistance for City sports programs up to a maximum of \$100 a year per child.

But while many municipalities make available a recreational subsidy for lower-income families, the eligibility criteria are often restrictive or unnecessarily onerous. In some communities, applicants must pay their doctors to complete a medical form in order to qualify for a subsidy worth only about \$50. This requirement is also an inappropriate use of the health care system.

A more positive approach is employed by the City of Vancouver, which introduced the OneCard program for low-income residents. The card allows access to all public swimming and ice skating sessions as well as use of skates during these sessions. It offers 50 percent discounts for skate and swim lessons as well as a variety of facilities. Free admission is also provided for the attendant of any person with a disability who requires physical, psychological or sensory assistance in order to participate in City programs.

Another response is for municipalities to make available their facilities at minimal or no charge for parts of the day or week. They can also set up free or low-cost programs. A related public policy option is to permit the use of schools for a wide range of after-hours activity.

The Community Use of Schools Initiative in Ontario is a positive example. The provincial government allocates funding to all school boards so that they can make school space more affordable for use after hours. Both indoor and outdoor school space is available at reduced rates to not-for-profit community groups, outside of regular school hours. In addition, not-for-profit groups have free after-school access at 220 designated priority schools located in 38 school boards across the province.

### *All this to say...*

Citizens and local organizations can articulate the values that are important to residents. They can identify local priorities, make the case for various interventions and act as a sounding board to assess the effectiveness of certain policies. Citizens and local organizations can test new approaches to building community and help fill crucial gaps in public services. They can lobby for larger-scale change at the policy level.

Governments can't create effective policies without the engagement of communities and communities won't have effective policies without the involvement of governments. Policies help shape the *context* of the community as well as the *content* of what it provides.

Through a suite of carefully selected public policies, governments enable us to design for well-being and to care about each other. At the end of the day, these public policies give expression to our humanity.

## Designing for well-being + caring for each other



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### Endnote

1. When I first met Paul Born, President of the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, he spoke about policy as marketing.

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