Panel “Community development in Canada and Chile: an inclusive approach to alleviate poverty”

Community development: why are urban communities important?

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In Vancouver, Canada, the Downtown Eastside - the city’s historic heart - experienced serious social and economic decline in the 1980s. By the mid-1990s, street-level drug trafficking and use, homelessness, prostitution, and crime were rampant in the Downtown Eastside communities. In response to a public health crisis caused by rising HIV infection rates and epidemic drug-overdose deaths, the governments of Canada, the Province of British Columbia, and the City of Vancouver joined forces and signed the Vancouver Agreement in 2000. These governments recognized that by merging budgets and working more closely together, and with community and business groups, they could achieve long-term, sustainable solutions to the public health and safety issues facing both residents and businesses.

In 2003 in the communities of Cerro Navia, Pudahuel and La Pintana, Chile, community organizations facing challenges similar to those in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside recognized that alone they could not respond to community issues such as the social exclusion of at-risk youth, poverty and inadequate educational opportunities for children and adults. The Chilean group PIIE created the Community Intersectoral Methodological Model - MOMIC using its Spanish acronym.

The experience in these Chilean communities and Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is of course different, but people in both countries share a common vision to achieve inclusive, equitable and sustainable solutions to poverty issues. And they believe that to endure and benefit those most in need, the solutions must be found with the active participation of representatives of all sectors, including community, civil society, business and government.

This panel will provide insight on the experiences in both countries and how they have come together to look for common solutions and exchange information and experiences. Particular attention will focus on:

- Poverty issues and the impact on communities in Chile and Vancouver’s inner city, specifically the Vancouver Agreement and MOMIC experiences: The problem.
- Multisectoral partnerships that facilitate social inclusivity: The approach.
- Community action influencing public policy design: The effect.
Community Development: Why are urban communities important?

In today’s global economy, urban communities have become the main hubs of economic activity and are recognized as economic engines of growth where infrastructure, key industries, supporting sectors, training organizations and research centres like universities and institutes present great opportunities for economic development. However, urban communities also constantly face complex challenges that cannot be solely addressed by any one level of government, community organizations, business or residents alone. Despite economic growth in many urban communities, poverty rates in Canada’s 20 largest cities have remained relatively unchanged over the past ten years and many low- and modest-income individuals and families are unable to afford their basic needs. Nor is labour force participation amongst low-income individuals increasing, but annual costs related to urban-centred crime is escalating significantly. The infrastructure gap in many urban centres is estimated in the billions of dollars.¹ These challenges represent real and significant costs and require a collaborative approach as illustrated by these two initiatives in Canada and Chile.

Urban neighborhoods have untapped human, economic and physical assets ready to be unleashed through a combination of public and private investments. Using our individual and collective experiences to encourage greater private investment may persuade policymakers to channel public investments and modify public policy for those who would invest in cities and their neighbourhoods, especially those in economic and social decline. In order to improve the lives of people in distressed urban neighbourhoods we must change the conversation about inner cities from deficit and disadvantage to one that recognizes the assets and potential of urban neighbourhoods, their residents and business owners and operators.

Our policy initiatives grow out of our shared experiences. As governments, local investor partners and the people living and working in urban neighbourhoods learn more each day about what works and what actions can make a difference, we can then better frame relevant public policy issues to obtain the necessary support from public, private and community agencies and organizations. Urban communities today are complex, diverse and dynamic. Those most successful in dealing with local challenges work towards positive change through shared learning and action to benefit those most in need which will ultimately benefit the community as a whole. Success will also be achieved with adherence to objectives like:

- Creating a sense of social coherence on a neighborhood basis through community, corporate and civic actions.
- Developing a sense of belonging through increased participation in community affairs to solve problems with local initiative, organization, self-help and mutual aid.
- Achieving changes in the attitude with civic consciousness and by motivating people to become involved in improving their life conditions, particularly those effecting the social and physical environment.

¹ Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Quality of Life Reporting System, 2004
Identifying and training local leaders.

Forging partnerships, as achieved by the Vancouver Agreement and MOMIC, helps to produce a new sense of community identity and pride among local residents and businesses, and their public and private sector partners, and a confidence in the future that may have been dormant. Such partnerships create opportunities for investment in low-income communities by the public and private sectors and community organizations and foundations.

If we look at the development of a single project, such as a housing or social service development, we can see how the human resources of talent, energy and skill within a community can attract and multiply other resources. This in turn creates not only a concrete physical improvement but produces an environment that nourishes further innovation and development. The first step towards such achievements is a group of residents and/or businesses who decide what is needed in their community. By making a decision about a particular development project, individuals and communities begin to empower themselves. The public and private funding partners can then come on board to help realize the project. Such developments can return abandoned buildings or vacant lots to productive use that otherwise are physically and psychologically destabilizing for the community. Construction of such projects provides opportunities for job creation and training and for development of a full range of skills that will stay with local residents for the rest of their lives.

Three critical threads are commonly present in the accomplishment of successful urban community developments:

- Private sector cooperation in self-sustaining, economically viable enterprises.
- Integration of education, employment and community development programs in an overall coordinated plan.
- Momentum and direction from the community in partnership with governments, private foundations, universities and educational institutes, and labour unions.

There are several steps and different paths that individuals and groups can take to solve the problems facing their communities, but for an effective, sustainable and equitable solution, the situation must be understood comprehensively and the plan created and carried out strategically. In partnerships such as the Vancouver Agreement and MOMIC, governments, the private sector, foundations and educational institutes can work with community groups and residents to identify and analyze data and policy initiatives in order to determine best-practice approaches for the particular issues facing specific communities.

What is clear from the Vancouver Agreement and MOMIC experiences is that no one level of government alone nor one sector, private, non-profit or community, can undertake and implement the necessary elements of successful urban community development. Solutions will vary from community to community and country to country, but they will be most successfully accomplished through the development of partnerships that include communities, the private sector and governments. Creation of community capacities, integrated streamlining of services, and sustained program support in some instances will also be factors of success.

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2 New Jersey Public Policy Research Institute, Community Development Tool Kit
Forward-thinking strategies that include a sound understanding of and approaches to present conditions, and a recognition of the skills and abilities inherent in a particular community, will help build resilience for the future.

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**Biography**

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