

Case study of grassroots community development: sustainable, flexible and cost-effective responses to local needs

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Abstract This paper presents the results of a case study of a grassroots community development initiative in St. John, New Brunswick. It was part of a larger study designed to investigate the sustainability of community-based crime prevention activities. This case study highlights a unique strategy for addressing local community needs. The lessons learned in St. John address many of the common challenges related to community development such as community mobilization, capacity building, planning, partnerships and sustainability. Some attention is also directed at the role of government and non-governmental agencies in community-based initiatives since this represents an ongoing concern for those involved in community development.

Introduction

In 1995, the John Howard Society of St. John, New Brunswick held a one-day workshop to identify priorities for the organization for the coming year. The workshop brought sixty community members together, including local residents and representatives from various governmental and non-governmental organizations in the community working in a variety of sectors including health, education, social welfare, recreation, and youth services. Those attending the workshop concluded that the needs of children and youth and their families were the most pressing for the community and should be given priority. In particular, youth crime was identified as a serious concern including rising rates of youth violence. The lack of resources available for young people and their families was also

noted. Some of the specific issues that were discussed included bullying, dating violence and family violence.

The needs identified at the workshop went far beyond the traditional mandate of the John Howard Society.¹ However, the agency and its staff accepted the challenge and worked with volunteers to develop and implement a community-based plan. The workshop resulted in the launching of a grassroots initiative that has lasted for nine years and grown far beyond anyone's expectations. Importantly, those involved in this process have worked hard to retain their independence and autonomy during a period of fiscal restraint and cutbacks in funding for various services.

In this paper, we present the results of a case study of this grassroots community development initiative. We examine the various strategies and tactics employed by this community to mobilize the resources needed to offer a growing list of programmes and services for children and youth, and their families. We begin with a brief discussion of the literature that informs our analysis.

Community development, community capacity and grassroots initiatives

Community development can be defined as broad-based change for the benefit of all community members. It is based on the 'common sense' notion that more developed communities are better able to meet the needs of their members (MacArthur Foundation, 2001, p. 1). Developed communities have more established and accessible assets (both hard and soft) and the ability to mobilize these assets to meet their needs (self-sufficiency). This is a compelling idea that implies that community development can be achieved by simply putting more financial and material resources into a community. Unfortunately, those working in this field know that community development is a much more complex process (Lacey, 2000; Stone, 1999). While resources are necessary, they alone are insufficient. As Warner (1999, p. 376) points out, wealthy communities are not always 'developed' communities and while many poor communities lack community development, some very wealthy communities do as well.

A second consideration for community-based initiatives is that in order for communities to act, they must have the capacity to do so. Community capacity can be defined as:

... the characteristics of communities that affect their ability to identify, mobilize, and address social and public health problems (Poole, 1997, p. 163).

¹ The John Howard Society works with incarcerated adult males, assisting them while they are in correctional facilities and helping them to make successful transitions to the community.

Community capacity consists of the human, physical, financial and social resources available to a given community that can be mobilized to meet local needs. This includes physical resources such as community centres, clinics, and recreational facilities. It also includes the human resources available in a community such as leadership and administrative skills of its members as well as their energy, talent and commitment. For community development to occur, a community has to have the capacity to mobilize the resources required to identify and respond to its own needs.

Recognition of the importance of community capacity has led many working in this field to focus on community capacity building in order to enhance the ability of communities to develop. The purpose of community capacity building is:

... to foster conditions that strengthen the characteristics of communities that enable them to plan, develop, implement and maintain effective community programs (Poole, 1997, p. 163).

Community capacity building sets the stage for community development but requires the mobilization of a community's assets and resources. That is, a community's capacity has to be *realised* through the application of community resources to a particular issue or issues. In this way, community capacity building must be a grounded activity insofar as it involves building both hard (e.g., building health centres) and soft (e.g., leadership training) assets that can be mobilized in response to local needs.

A case study of a grassroots initiative: the Resiliency Centre

This case study describes the development and operation of the Resiliency Centre (the Centre) by the John Howard Society of St. John, New Brunswick, Canada, in order to provide an organizational home for a grassroots initiative that developed in the community. St. John is a port city that serves as the regional centre for the surrounding area. The John Howard Society of St. John (the Society), a group whose mandate is working with adult male offenders and their families, is the host agency for the initiative. This agency has one of the highest caseloads in the province with an average of 3400 people being released into this community from correctional institutions each year.

The Centre was selected for study after it was identified as an example of a sustainable, community-based initiative during a larger study of sustainability. A site selection protocol was used to identify potential communities for this larger project and a purposive sample was drawn of potential sites. Six Canadian communities including St. John were identified through

a step-wise sample selection process (Caputo *et al.*, 2003). Communities selected for this project were believed to have social development-oriented crime prevention activities that had persisted over time. An important caveat was that these activities had to reflect a sense of community ownership and involvement that went beyond the parameters of a specific funded project. That is, they had to have a community versus a project focus that reflected a high degree of community ownership.

Data collection involved a combination of efforts, including:

- reviewing community profile information from Statistics Canada;
- reviewing information from the federal government agency sponsoring community-based crime prevention including an examination of project files from those communities that had received project funding;
- interviews with key informants – national, regional and provincial crime prevention officials;
- Interviews with knowledgeable informants from the selected communities (the ‘drivers’ of the activities);
- site visits to each of the six sites, during which in-depth interviews were conducted with key actors and focus groups sessions were held with institutional and community members; and
- wherever possible, discussions were held with the participants/beneficiaries of the crime prevention activities.

The St. John Resiliency Centre: origin and objectives

As noted earlier, the Society organized a one-day workshop to consider their priorities for the upcoming year. The meeting brought together sixty representatives including community residents, retired professionals and representatives from various government and non-governmental organizations working in the community. Those attending the meeting concluded that priority should be given to programmes for youth and their families. Having identified a priority for action, the question became how to meet this need in light of the difficult funding climate.

The Society’s Director, who had called the meeting, suggested that each person should consider what they were willing to contribute and in this spirit, he asked his own staff whether the priorities identified at the community meeting were sufficiently important to them to convince them to devote some of their own volunteer time to the initiative. The Director explained this strategy by stating that he would not ask others to do what he himself was not prepared to do. The support of twenty members was elicited who were all willing and able to volunteer their time. An additional twenty volunteers were recruited from the community including representatives

from other social service agencies, retired professionals and members of the general public.

After the initial start up, it became clear that the activities of this initiative had to be kept separate from the ongoing activities of the Society. To accomplish this, the Society's Board of Directors suggested that a new and separate organization be established. With this in mind, The Resiliency Centre was created with a mandate to develop and deliver programmes for youth and their families in the community.

Once established, the Centre began to get requests from various community groups for assistance in addressing specific problems. For example, bullying was identified as a serious concern in a local school. The Centre's strategy was to offer to work with this school group to clearly define the need and to develop an appropriate response. Those directly involved were required to provide a place to meet and volunteers to help deliver the programme. Centre staff then worked with this community group to develop an anti-bullying programme. In general, if an existing programme is available, Centre staff will find out what it will cost to acquire and then seek the necessary funding from local service clubs or the business community. If no existing programme meets the specific need, a local professional Social Worker is hired to develop a tailored programme. These tailored programmes are then put through a rigorous certification process to ensure their quality.

Local service clubs and businesses are approached with funding requests to cover the costs of buying or developing programme materials. This typically involves a request for a few thousand dollars per programme. Centre staff approach supporters on a rotating basis so as not to overtax them. Also, once a Centre staff member is trained, this individual provides training to other community members and agency representatives. This training brings in some funds from those agencies with training budgets that can afford to pay for staff development. However, the training also raises the level of human capital available in the community and results in a pool of trained and available community volunteers.

By using volunteer labour – both lay and professional – and space provided by local community groups, the Centre has managed to deliver programmes for minimal costs. The Centre has run successfully this way since 1995 and continues to operate as an autonomous and independent community resource. It has expanded its programming exponentially since 1995 and now offers a wide range of programmes and services to several thousand youth and families each year. Moreover, news of its success has spread to neighbouring towns and villages that have approached the Centre and asked for their help in establishing grassroots initiatives of their own based on the same model.

Resiliency Centre activities

The Centre provides educational and therapeutic programmes for youth and their families as well as training for professionals working in the community. They began with a series of cognitive behavioural programmes including anger management (for both young people and their parents) as well as a family-nurturing programme designed to enhance family functioning and support. As the initiative developed, the Centre was asked by various community groups to try to meet additional needs. In response, a series of other programmes have been developed including comprehensive social and emotional skills development; a drug awareness programme; a shoplifting and theft deterrence programme; a programme aimed at those that have been in conflict with the law; and a programme that educates youth and their parents about the operation of the youth justice system.

One of the most appealing features of the Centre is that the money it raises goes to the people in need of support and services – none of its funds goes to staff, buildings, or the government. Each dollar is used to meet local community needs. To get a sense of the cost savings that the structure allows, they assessed how much it would cost to deliver the programmes through traditional means, that is, with paid staff instead of volunteers and with office space and related costs. A conservative estimate of the cost of offering their programmes in a traditional way came to \$111,369 per year. The actual costs of offering their programmes totalled \$4613 (John Howard Society, 2002). In the words of one volunteer, this economic use of resources has been ‘a real selling point’.

Because programmes are based on local needs, funding from external agencies is an issue, especially funding from various levels of government. External funding agencies often want to set the ‘needs agenda’, an approach that does not work with the Centre’s focus on meeting local needs. As a result, large grants offered by state agencies have been turned down when the priorities for the funds were not local priorities.

Centre volunteers are drawn from across the community and include community residents, retired professionals and service providers. For example, we met four volunteers who were previously clients of programmes offered by the Centre. Jennifer was referred to the Centre with her son. She stayed on as a volunteer and now co-facilitates an anger management programme. Angela was a former inmate looking for a way to give back to the community. She was rejected as a volunteer at other agencies because of her criminal past. The Centre welcomed her as a volunteer and she was offered an opportunity to take a number of their training programmes. She now has full-time employment running a woman’s

shelter. The Elizabeth Fry Society referred Ellen to the Centre for anger management. After completing the programme, she stayed on as a volunteer. Maria, a parent with a child in open custody, was referred for support in coping both with her son being in conflict with the law and the social isolation of being a parent with a child in trouble. She too was trained by the Centre and is now a volunteer with the family support group programme. These volunteers praised the Centre for helping them and for allowing them to give back to their community. One volunteer described the volunteers as having 'open ears and open minds'. They are passionate about their support for this grassroots initiative and commented on how it differed from the 'top down' services they had encountered in the past.

Staff members from a variety of front-line agencies also volunteer with a large number coming from the Society. While providing social services with volunteer labour may seem problematic in that staff may feel they must do this volunteer work in order to keep their jobs, this was far from the case. Staff stressed that they volunteered because they were committed to the Centre and they had a passion for its work. They described it as a compassionate environment that is making a real difference in people's lives. They felt a sense of ownership and pride in its accomplishments. As a result, staff at the Society who used to be quite transitory now want to stay in their jobs. Indeed, the Director noted that since the Centre was established, they have seen a reduction in staff turnover and an increase in staff morale.

Professionals who volunteer at the Centre include Jim, who delivers one of the programmes. For his paid work, he is employed within the criminal justice system. He found the Centre provided positive outcomes and was responsive to real needs. Rebecca came to the Society on a student placement. While there, she was offered the opportunity to take the Nurturing Family Program training. She decided to stay on as a volunteer once the training was complete. Tina is a professional working in the mental health sector. Despite her busy schedule, she chooses to make time to volunteer since she finds it a valuable and rewarding experience.

The Centre has succeeded in building capacity within the community. This includes partnerships with other agencies and with people within the community that serve as a source of referrals and volunteers. Staff have worked hard to ensure that there is no duplication of services and they 'back off' if someone else in the community is already providing a particular service or programme. In these cases, they make contacts and provide referrals for youth and families to existing services. They have also developed a barter system between agencies reducing the reliance on money to get things accomplished. They have trained a wide range of

individuals from community members, to employees of service agencies, to policy-makers and people working in the criminal justice system. These skills have been employed to help others within the community, and for some, they serve as stepping-stones to paid employment. In addition, the training of policy-makers and individuals working in the criminal justice system has served to connect policy-makers and funding agencies to this model of grassroots activity and demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the needs of a community.

Discussion and conclusions

What can we learn from this community-based initiative that has been sustained for nine years? The Centre provides a unique approach and some interesting insights into the process of community development. Perhaps the most important finding is that a grassroots initiative has succeeded in becoming institutionalized in such a way as to maintain its independence and autonomy while working closely with other service providers and government agencies. As they say in their annual report:

The Resiliency Centre is not a place as much as it is a collective voice of the community. Community expertise, talents, energy and resources of its members are the components which make up and drive the Resiliency Centre through partnerships and collaborations with Community Agencies and Organizations, Government Departments, Professional Services, various committees and community members (John Howard Society, 2002).

One of the most innovative elements of the experience is that an institutional home was created for a grassroots initiative within an existing service agency. This has provided the grassroots initiative with the type of administrative and coordination support that is lacking in most community-based initiatives. While many community development initiatives benefit from the contribution of 'in-kind' resources such as office space, phones and fax machines, the Centre approach takes this a step further. Volunteers drawn from the ranks of the host agency are able to schedule work tasks and volunteer hours on a flexible schedule. This allows them to carry out Centre responsibilities during normal business hours if necessary and make up their 'work hours' by coming in early, staying late or working through lunch/coffee breaks. Having a dedicated group involved in administration, coordination and communication provides a level of continuity to a community-based initiative that is difficult to achieve for most community groups that rely on weekly or monthly meetings of steering committees.

This continuity greatly enhances the effectiveness of the Centre and contributes to its sustainability.

Dovetailing community work with agency work has also had positive benefits for the host agency. Thus, the Executive Director, the Board of Directors and the Society staff all realize that they are actually better able to meet the needs of their adult male clients when they also meet the needs of the children and families of these men. Also, agency staff members have had an opportunity to develop both personally and professionally by using a wide variety of skills in their volunteer roles.

The Centre's ability to develop effective horizontal community partnerships has allowed it to flourish in a typically political service delivery environment. It carefully avoids service duplication, and partner agencies are not threatened about losing their clients or funding sources. Also, it has been able to successfully negotiate vertical relationships with municipal, provincial and federal government agencies. Throughout this process, it has resisted taking funding when this could result in a loss of autonomy over needs identification or programme development.

Another interesting finding from the St. John case study is the different ways participants used the term community. For example, many of the participants referred to the City of St. John as their community. Interestingly, this went beyond the official city limits to encompass the entire region. At the same time, the participants talked about local neighbourhoods within the city as communities. They did not draw a distinction between residents and service providers when speaking about the broader St. John community. They did, however, make some distinctions when discussing local community groups since they required the groups seeking assistance to provide space and local volunteers (presumably those living and working in these local communities).

Both the broader and more local referents of community defined spaces within which case study participants felt they could legitimately identify themselves as community members. The result was that while community residents of St. John are clearly considered community members, so too are the service providers and other professionals working there. Defining professional service providers as community members should not be regarded as unusual. Indeed, service providers from non-governmental agencies often speak in public and at professional meetings as members of and advocates for the communities they serve. This is usually done to identify themselves as community-based professionals in contrast to those working for various levels of government. Interestingly, however, even this distinction was not hard and fast since several volunteers who work for government agencies described themselves as members of the community. They pointed out that they live in the area and choose to

volunteer their time outside of work to the Centre in order to make *their* community a better place to live.

The St. John experience provides a glimpse of how community residents and social service workers can come together to meet locally defined needs. However, this grassroots initiative depends on professional service providers volunteering their time. This raises questions about who should be responsible for meeting local needs. In this regard, it is important to note that the Centre provides only a limited number of programmes. Government-funded agencies continue to be the backbone of the social service system in St. John. These agencies remain essential for meeting community needs. What the Centre in fact does is identify service gaps – local needs that are not currently being met by the social service system. It then provides a process for responding immediately to these local needs. Service gaps are inevitable, in part, because policies are centrally set and resource allocations are prioritized. Without a way of responding such as the one provided by the Centre, these local needs would continue to be unmet, as agencies are slow to adapt in response to changing needs and circumstances. The result is not only under or poorly serviced clients but considerable frustration among professionals. By creating a means of identifying and responding quickly to these unmet needs, the Centre provides professionals and community residents with a sense of empowerment and accomplishment.

The Centre's experience also provides some important insights into community capacity and capacity building. It is important to note that most communities, including disadvantaged communities, have some level of capacity present. The challenge for community development work is to identify this capacity and to nurture it to the point where a community is able to identify its needs and mobilize the resources necessary for meeting them. The Centre does this in an interesting way. As noted above, it begins with requests for assistance from local community groups that have identified a need or concern. Then, it offers support and assistance but requires the local community group to provide an appropriate space and willing volunteers. This is a minimum request for most communities since there is usually an institutional structure that can be accessed for space (e.g., schools, churches, local government or NGO offices). And if the need is meaningful, there will also be a group of committed individuals (including both service providers and community residents) willing to devote their time and energy to the cause.

These two elements (space and volunteers) are typically found in most community-based initiatives. What is unique about this approach is that volunteers work with local community groups to clarify and articulate the specific need then search for an appropriate response together.

Importantly, they then train local community members in the delivery of the programme and leave the community after they have built sufficient capacity for the community to address this need on their own. In a real sense, Centre staff facilitate community capacity building and put processes in place where this capacity can be realized on an ongoing basis. Thus, once one issue in a community has begun to be addressed, local community members gain confidence in working with staff on other issues of concern. This is what has driven the expansion in the number and types of programmes offered by the Centre since its inception.

The unique approach developed in St. John has been successful because it has been able to meet real community needs on an ongoing basis. This success should be placed in context, however, since it is based on providing educational, therapeutic and cognitive programmes. While important and useful, these programmes do little to address deeper structural problems and inequality issues related to poverty and unemployment or the lack of appropriate social, recreational and educational resources in a community. To be fair, these are large issues not easily resolved at the community level. Nevertheless, the approach in St. John needs to be understood for what it can contribute to our understanding of the community development process. It provides us with an example of how a grassroots initiative can be started and sustained. It shows us how bottom-up decision-making can be based on meaningful community issues. Locating the Centre within an established NGO represents a model of how the existing institutional order can be harnessed to assist in the process of capacity building and community mobilization. Establishing and animating both horizontal and vertical linkages demonstrates how existing social service networks can be utilized to meet the needs identified by local community groups. The Centre experience also shows how community capacity can be nurtured and sustained through the combined efforts of service providers and community residents. While the Centre model is not a panacea for community development, it does offer important insights into what can be accomplished by successful grassroots initiatives.

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