



## WHERE WE LIVE MATTERS

*Community Development Halton has followed with attention the growth of neighbourhood development initiatives across North America and Europe. We celebrate the strong sense of place-based work where neighbourhood residents generate the social capital necessary to create activities that enhance the quality of their lives and, ultimately, build community organizations to sustain these efforts. "Where We Live Matters" is an exploration into what we already know about neighbourhood development, what successes exist and what challenges continue especially in these changing and turbulent times. "Where We Live Matters" is a journey marked by learning, hope and possibilities of well-being. I am pleased to bring to your attention this important reflection document.*

*Joey Edwardh*

Despite the enormous investments from government and other funders, as well as the efforts of several generations of service providers, complex problems such as concentrated pockets of poverty, social exclusion and poor health outcomes continue to characterize life in many neighbourhoods and communities in Canada. Over time, traditional services and programs have tended to have modest impacts at best and overall social and economic indicators seem impervious to significant change. So, what are we not getting?

Over the last few years, in the hope of having a greater impact on such issues, funders and others

have turned to place-based investment in programs, services and approaches and focused their efforts on neighbourhoods. These approaches are characterized by engagement of residents and the coordination of a broad range of stakeholders that include service providers, governments, funders and sometimes the private sector. They are generally seen as the most promising approach to addressing the deep-seated issues neighbourhoods often face. However, the evaluation of the impact of these comprehensive, place-based initiatives is still in its infancy. To date they have had, at best, mixed effectiveness in addressing deep structural issues such as poverty.

*Where We Live Matters* presents an approach to neighbourhood work based on best and promising practice. It also acknowledges some of the limitations to and the challenges of neighbourhood work that arise from the larger social structures and relationships of power in which neighbourhoods are situated and in which residents seek to build their own futures.

### **An Approach to Building Neighbourhoods**

*Where We Live Matters* presents an approach to effective neighbourhood work built on the following principles and best practices:

- Determining whether a neighbourhood is ready for this kind of work and when this is not the case, working to build readiness;

- Maximizing neighbourhood control of activity and decision-making;
- Identifying and building on neighbourhood strengths (assets);
- Building social connections and relationships within the neighbourhood (building social capital);
- Developing social/neighbourhood capacity to take action and;
- Using strategies that fit the situation (community development processes and social action strategies)

While the approach as presented assumes that someone from outside the neighbourhood may start the process, such as a worker from a human service or government agency, it can also be applied to situations where people within a neighbourhood take a look and decide to do something about their community and its issues.<sup>1</sup>

The diagram on the following page lays out this approach for neighbourhood work.<sup>2</sup>

### Key Elements of the Approach

The approach presented in this paper is fluid and dynamic and contains a number of stages or elements. However, it does not propose a linear process, but rather one of repeated cycling back and forth, depending on the situation and the people who are involved in the work. Key elements in the approach are:

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<sup>1</sup> Numerous terms can be used relatively interchangeably to describe this role. We have chosen "animateur," a French term, we are using to mean "a person who enlivens or encourages something, organizes projects and gets people interested in them."

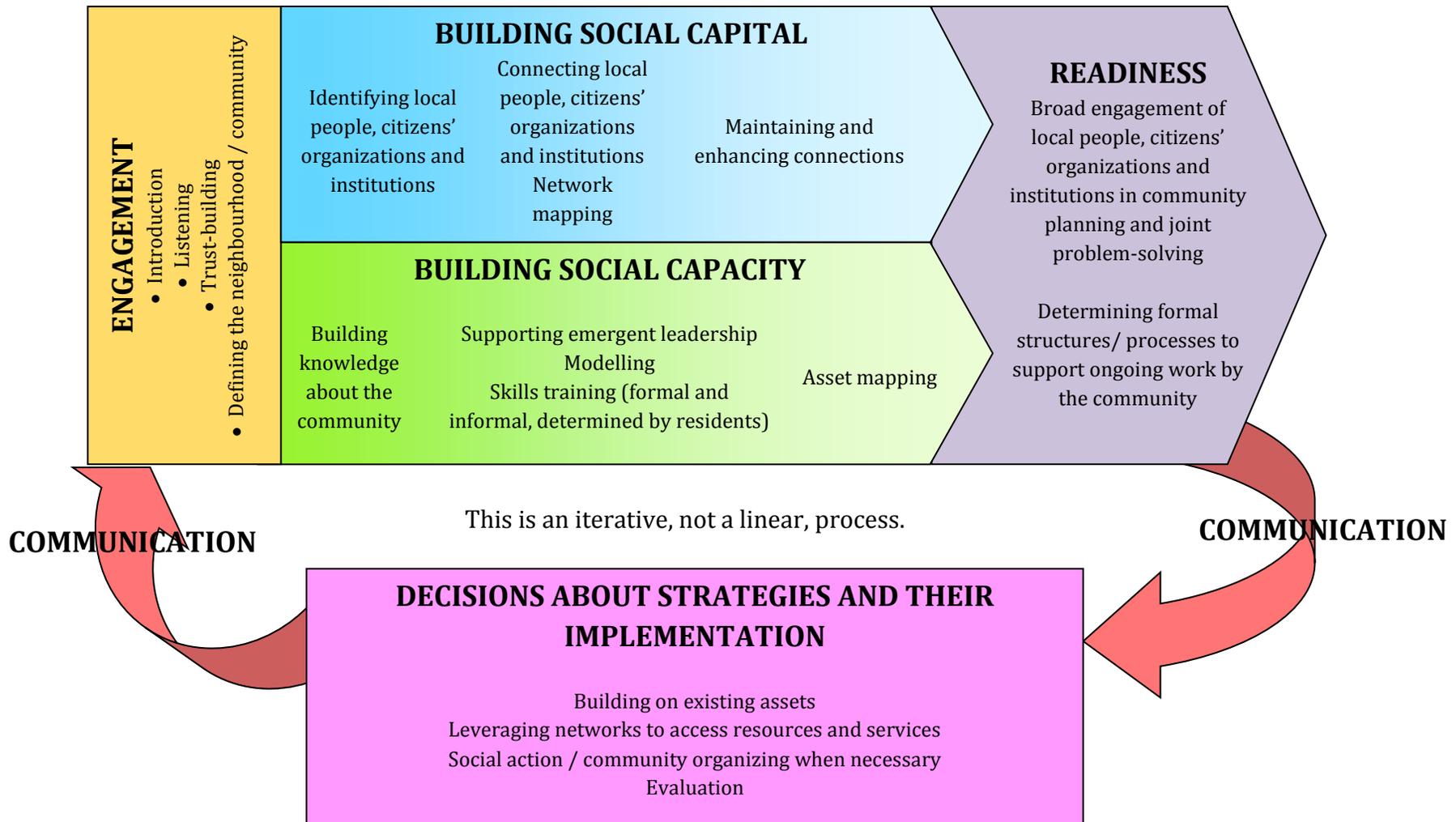
<sup>2</sup> There is an extensive Bibliography attached to this paper. In particular, work by McKnight and Kretzman, Mattessich, Monsey and Roy, Margaret Wheatley and Bill Lee should be consulted when considering the implications for practice when undertaking neighbourhood work.

**An engagement process:** If someone from outside the neighbourhood is initiating work, they need time to introduce themselves, to get to know the neighbourhood and begin a process of building trust. If work is being started by someone from inside the neighbourhood, these processes are also important. People should be on the lookout for issues that are identified by a number of residents. It may be possible to identify natural neighbourhood leaders. It is important to encourage these leaders to talk to others until a consensus emerges about the important issues. This process will vary from community to community and neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Eventually, people may agree that it is a good idea to convene a small group to explore some of what was heard as important issues. Alternately, they may decide to put on an event that would provide opportunities for neighbours to chat about issues important to them.

A critical step in this process is encouraging the people who live in an area to define its boundaries. They may NOT correspond to the official definition of the neighbourhood, such as a planning area, a potential problem for urban planners, but not for people living in a place.

The animateur's role at this stage is building trust and connecting people with one another. An informal inventory of individual and community assets should be kept and maybe even an informal network map, both of which are processes that the neighbourhood residents may later wish to firm up through more formal processes. Once issues are identified, broader participation from the community can be encouraged. This moves the work from engagement to building social relationships, referred to as social capital.

# An Approach to Building Neighbourhoods



**Building social capital** is a repeated process of identifying and connecting people and organizations to each other. The animateur has a responsibility to assist others in identifying and furthering connections. Eventually, a formal network mapping session (or several spread out over time) can be useful. This not only involves people in a fun visual exercise, but gives clues as to where there are strengths and weaknesses in the neighbourhood's networks. Through network building, neighbourhood strengths and community assets are uncovered and vital connections can be made that link community assets to those who can benefit from them.

**Building social capacity:** As the process of building social capital (connections) increases in scope, the opportunity to develop a good knowledge of the community will emerge. Sometimes this will be informal. In other cases, those who have engaged in the work to date may wish to gain this information by holding a meeting or doing a survey. When assessing community readiness, the animateur will have to consider how to support other new leaders to develop the skill sets they require to do the work without dictating to them what those skill sets should be. Sometimes this can be done by modelling (e.g. how to put a good meeting agenda together or how to do minutes) or through more formal training if this is what residents want. If external experts are needed to do training, it is important that these experts understand they are acting as resources rather than experts who will tell the community what it needs or what it should do.

It is also important to be alert to the opportunity to build a formal vision of where the

neighbourhood wants to go or what it wants to set as the goals for its work together.

Finally, the animateur also has a role in encouraging a view of the community that is based on "look what we have to work with" rather than on "look how damaged we are." At some point, this might lead to formal asset mapping.

**Planning and problem-solving:** At some point in the process, the community will be ready, or at least believe it is ready, to take on issues and engage in problem-solving. If a formal vision or set of goals has not been established, it is important to do so now.

Nothing feeds success more effectively than success, so it is important for animateurs to determine the neighbourhood's readiness to act. It is also better to start with quick wins demonstrating that, by working together, neighbours can achieve shared goals. If a neighbourhood is not yet ready, a good explanation about why something might be premature may be all that is required. If the neighbourhood wishes to press on, animateurs have a critical role in assisting the community to reflect on and learn from whatever happens.

As the issues get bigger and more complex, neighbourhoods must deal with the possibility of needing more formal organizational structures and processes. If there has been effective transfer of skills and learning, and neighbourhood assets have been effectively mobilized, some of what constitutes good practice will have already been adopted (for example: communication lines are well understood by all; people have learned to

work together respectfully; a tradition of consensus or majority rules will have been established; minutes of meetings are being kept, etc.). As the community becomes more formally organized, the external worker's role is to give advice, serve as a resource, assist others to leverage resources the neighbourhood has identified that it needs and encourage the ongoing building of social capital and capacity. Ultimately, the people in the neighbourhood will decide what they wish to take on, but the animateur has an important role to play as a resource person throughout this decision-making process.

**Communication:** Throughout all of these processes, the importance of effective, open communication that helps build trust cannot be overemphasized. Particularly today, the use of social media needs to be factored into communications as does the identification and use of communication vehicles that may be unique to the neighbourhood.

### **Characteristics of Communities in Which Effective Community Building Processes have been Carried Out**

Mattessich, Monsey and Roy identified a number of characteristics of communities in which effective community building processes have been carried out:

- Community awareness of an issue
- Motivation from within the community
- Small geographic area
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Pre-existing social cohesion
- Ability to discuss, reach consensus and co-operate

- Existing identifiable leadership
- Prior success with community-building (Mattessich, Monsey and Roy 1997, 14).

While the authors did not set these out formally as readiness indicators, they indicate that the more a community exhibits these characteristics, the more likely it is that community building efforts will be effective. The implications for practice from this set of factors is clear; where there is a gap between what is needed to be ready and actual community conditions, time and resources may well be required to assist the community to become ready for community building.

### **Personal and Professional Qualities and Skills for Effective Neighbourhood Work**

If someone is interested in doing neighbourhood work, it is helpful to consider the skills and qualities that will make them effective in that work, whether as a worker from outside the community or as a leader in the neighbourhood. Among key qualities and skills are:

- Understanding of the community
- Sincerity of commitment
- A relationship of trust
- Level of organizing experience
- Ability to be flexible and adaptable

(Mattessich, Monsey and Roy 1997, 16-17)

To these qualities, CDH observes that really skilled neighbourhood animateurs are able to "bracket" themselves, i.e. not let their own assumptions and biases colour their work. This does not mean abandoning values and principles, but it does mean being transparent about them,

encouraging the same in others and not imposing them on others.

Communities bring with them not just assets and strengths, but they often have embedded within them the potential for conflict in the form of oppressive behaviours and attitudes such as racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia and ableism. There may arise in the work challenging personalities who want to, for whatever reasons, undo the work of the neighbourhood to date, or create difficult power struggles.

Part of working effectively in communities calls on the animateur to assist residents to be conscious of the values and principles they hold to be important and help them name and deal with actions and behaviours that violate them. This is not easy work, but the modelling of appropriate behavior and a willingness to facilitate the identification and resolution of value-driven conflict is well worth the effort.

### **How Did the Approach to Building Neighbourhoods Emerge?**

In getting to the point where an approach to effective neighbourhood work could be presented, an extensive literature search was undertaken along with some ad hoc discussions with seasoned community animateurs.

*Where We Live Matters* starts with two related sections that help the reader understand key principles and theory that have evolved over the years to describe neighbourhood work (or community work as it is often called), and the best and promising practices that have emerged from the field.

**Section One** discusses key concepts related to neighbourhood work, including place, community assets, social capital, network mapping, community/social capacity, empowerment and approaches to citizen engagement. Many of these re-emerge in the approach for neighbourhood work that is presented in the paper.

**Section Two** outlines best and promising practices in neighbourhood work, focusing on place-based versus people-based activity, professional/external control versus resident/local control, asset-based versus deficit-based approaches and the tension that exists between dealing with symptoms versus root causes of persistent social issues.

Finally, because it represented a significant segment of the research that informs this paper, an appendix is included providing a history of place-based neighbourhood work. It explores the rich legacy of place-based practice we have inherited, work that relates to vitalizing or revitalizing neighbourhoods that might normally be viewed as disadvantaged or plagued with social problems.<sup>3</sup> It begins with the settlement house movement of one hundred years ago and goes on to examine the urban renewal and development years, social activism and social action of the 1960s and later, the place-focused social policy interventions of the American War on Poverty, the Canadian development of universal social programs and the emergence in the last ten to fifteen years of Comprehensive

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<sup>3</sup> This understanding of disadvantaged neighbourhoods is, itself, shaped by history and a dominant human service system that sees problems and disadvantages rather than assets and resources.

Community Initiatives both in Canada and the United States.

### Concluding Remarks

There is a growing sense among many people that the large institutions that have been created over time to manage and regulate our daily lives have failed. This is seen through a diminishing confidence in, and growing disenchantment with, these institutions from which people feel increasingly alienated and which they no longer trust.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by this:

...people's capacity to self-organize is the most powerful change process there is...

All systems go through life cycles. There is progress, setbacks, seasons. When a new effort begins, it feels like spring. People are excited by new possibilities, innovations and ideas abound, problems get solved, people feel inspired and motivated to contribute. It all works very well, for a time.

And then, especially if there is growth and success, things can start to go downhill. Leaders lose trust in people's ability to self-organize and feel the need to take control,

to standardize everything, to issue policies, regulations, and laws. Self-organization gets replaced by over-organization; compliance becomes more important than creativity. Means and ends get reversed, and people struggle to uphold the system rather than having the system support them. These large, lumbering bureaucracies - think about education, healthcare, government, business - no longer have the capacity to create solutions to the very problems they were created to solve. (Wheatley 2011, 9 - 10)

Place, particularly the smaller local space we call our home, our community, our neighbourhood, holds the promise of being an antidote to the institutional juggernauts around us. It is here that we make connections and can find in each other the resources to effect meaningful change in our day-to-day world.

Being able to work with people where they live in ways which honour them and make a REAL difference in their lives on a day-to-day basis is "right work." Being able to do this work effectively is critical.

*Where We Live Matters* can be found on our website [www.cdhalton.ca](http://www.cdhalton.ca)



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