BUILDING COMMUNITIES: EFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

LESSONS LEARNED FINAL REPORT

Acknowledgements

Series

Canadian governments are trying to achieve the most productive and cost-effective results from human resource programs and policies. Professionally-conducted evaluations can help them reach that goal. They document our experiences with policies and programs that have had similar goals. They add to the "corporate memory" that helps us make still better decisions in the future.

At Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), we have a strong commitment to continuous learning and improvement. Over the past decade, we have invested time and money in evaluating many of our programs and policies covering a wide range of human resources development issues. These have been complemented by our reviews of evaluations conducted by other governments, in Canada and internationally, in the area of human resource initiatives.

HRDC developed the "Lessons Learned" series to make this wealth of information and insight available to more people more easily. The Lessons Learned studies are a series of documents and supporting videos that synthesize what evaluations in Canada and other countries have taught us about a range of high-profile human resource policy priorities. They summarize what we know about the effectiveness of policy initiatives, programs, services and funding mechanisms.

Lessons Learned are of interest to senior managers and policy analysts in Canada's governments. Program managers, public policy researchers and stakeholders such as Aboriginal authorities and organizations, can also benefit from understanding the lessons we have learned from past and present programs.

HRDC is pleased to present the latest study in this series, which is one of two companion documents related to Aboriginal social and economic development issues. This particular document focuses on the lessons learned from past experience with social development programs that are applicable to Canada's Aboriginal population. This study was conducted in support of the Regional Bilateral Agreements (RBAs) which have devolved control and responsibility for the design and delivering of programs directly to local Aboriginal organizations. These same RBAs will end in March 1999, and will be replaced by new agreements signed under the new Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the development of policies and programs that will be part of this new approach.

As a learning organization, HRDC will continue to experiment with new approaches and evaluate their effectiveness. HRDC recognizes the vital importance of the evaluation process and is committed to continuing its work in this area.

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1. Introduction

Background

Children born in Canada can expect to enjoy a standard of living and a quality of life which are among the highest in the world. At the present time, however, these remain only elusive goals for children born to many First Nations, Metis and Inuit parents. These children are many times more likely than others to live in substandard housing, to live with violence, to leave school early and to experience repeated periods of unemployment as adults. They are likely to live fewer years than other Canadians and to be less healthy throughout those years.[1]

Governments, communities[2] and organizations have attempted to alleviate these conditions through a myriad of policies and programs.[3] But these programs -- and the resources and energy committed to them -- never appear to be adequate and gaps, inequities and problems remain.

Perspective and Purpose

Over time, governments and communities have recognized that the dilemma is due to their policies and programs addressing specific problems without addressing the context which creates those problems. Recently governments and Aboriginal communities have attempted to work in a more comprehensive and holistic fashion. This report -- Building Communities -- supports their efforts by drawing lessons from the experience of different communities with practices which:

- ◆ emphasize prevention through the long term rather than remediation in the short term; and

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1. Barsh, 1994: 2.

2. In this context, "community" refers to both geographic communities, such as First Nations reserves, and communities of people, for example Metis or other Aboriginal people living in Canada's urban centres or Inuit poeple living in Nunavut.

3. The Privy Council Office, for example, has identified over 80 programs offering important assistance to Aboriginal people living off reserve, of which perhaps 35 percent are directed primarily or exclusively to them. See Canada, Information and Research Centre, Privy Council Office, 1997

- ◆ strengthen individuals, families and communities in a comprehensive and holistic manner.

This report begins from the premise that social and economic well-being are interrelated and are dependent upon people having a wide range of positive life experiences, life skills, social supports and productive opportunities. It acknowledges that Aboriginal people and Canadian governments are committed to working together, as partners, toward achieving their common goals within the context of Aboriginal self-determination and self-government.

Methodology

This report could not rely upon program reviews and formal evaluations as do many other Lessons Learned reports. First, there are few communities which are working -- or are able to work -- in a comprehensive and holistic manner. Second, program reviews and evaluations generally focus on the operations and objectives of a specific initiative. They rarely ask questions about prevention, about the overall well-being of a community, or about long-term impact on individuals, families and communities.

The lessons summarized in this report, therefore, rely more extensively upon:

- ◆ key informant interviews with federal, provincial and territorial government staff and with individuals associated with different Aboriginal agencies, both on and off reserve;

- ◆ the best thinking as reflected in Canadian and international literature on social development and community development programming; and

- ◆ studies of those communities, in Canada and elsewhere, where community development principles and practices have been the driving force behind change.

This report focuses on the **process** of change and, using those different sources, offers important lessons about **how** to build stronger communities and **how** to achieve positive change through the long term. The report organizes the lessons in three categories: general lessons relating to the design and orientation of policies and programs; specific lessons relating to community practices and program operations; and living lessons which illustrate the experience of a particular community whose social development strategies are based upon community development principles.

2. General Lessons

The key informants, the international literature and the example of selected communities all indicate that fundamental change is needed in the way in which governments and Aboriginal communities approach their problems. They suggest the need to shift:

- from residual programs which address immediate problems to developmental programming which works toward a vision of the future for both individuals and the community;

- from discrete programs to comprehensive, coordinated strategies; and

- from government control over policy and programs to community ownership.

Lesson 1: Policy and programs need to focus on preventing social breakdown in Aboriginal communities.

Historically programs implemented in Aboriginal communities have focused upon specific problems that are already fully developed and severe. And they have addressed individual problems without addressing the social environment, which is at the root of those problems.

Over the short term, this approach may appear effective. But this approach has often proved to be very much a palliative, admittedly important for the individual but clearly incapable of making a real difference through the long term, for either the individual or the community.

The shortcomings associated with this approach are widely acknowledged. Within government, agencies such as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) recognize the importance of adopting more of a preventative approach.

The lesson, therefore, is to emphasize prevention and to invest in infants, children and youth so as to give them a sound foundation upon which to build. These investments will help ensure that young people are able to escape the cycle of social and economic poverty, which has entrapped many of their parents.

Lesson 2: Social development: applying the model in Aboriginal communities.

The past decades have produced powerful evidence that efforts are required in Aboriginal communities to address the underlying conditions which shape people's lives. Experience suggests that while residual programs are fine for addressing the immediate needs of individuals, the inequities confronting Aboriginal people require fundamental and comprehensive change based upon a social development model.

The greatest strength of the social development model is its inclusiveness. The model addresses not only the person, but the family and community, and brings into the circle the full range of people with a stake in the community's well being.

This approach, however, has many and diverse requirements. **First**, it requires a fundamental faith in the appropriateness of the approach since the tangible benefits will become evident and measurable only through the long term.

Second, the social development model requires setting objectives that are broad in scope and long-term in perspective, and that encompass a range of social and economic conditions. Very often this will require piecing together a complex web of funding and commitments from different sources. It will mean managing, concurrently, a diverse set of programs which together address housing, economic development and social services needs.

It also requires unprecedented commitments by the full range of agencies to subordinate their traditional authority over critical functions and to work collectively and cooperatively.

Third, the social development model requires acknowledging community residents as the primary stakeholders in changing community behaviours. The model requires that those most directly affected have control over the key policy and program decisions. Progress is not possible unless it enjoys both the trust of community residents and their involvement through the course of the process.

In this regard, both the literature and the key informants suggest that not every community is ready to take on such a comprehensive approach. Community readiness and capacity play a critical role in the timing and pace of social development.

Fourth, the social development model requires leadership which:

◆   is visionary, motivational and committed;

- can articulate the initiative, build the necessary consensus, manage the change process and continually refine and redesign the effort without losing the community's support;

- can address barriers and develop alternatives when necessary, handle the failures and setbacks that invariably occur, and take advantage of opportunities that present themselves; and

- is convinced that the existing systems are badly flawed and require fundamental change.

Lesson 3: Coordination and linkages across programs, agencies and jurisdictions contribute to program effectiveness.

Historically there has been little coordination among the many federal, provincial and community agencies involved in Aboriginal programming and community development. Government and community agencies tend not to coordinate their efforts because they feel an obligation to protect their own resources and separate organizational missions.

Historically government and community agencies tended not to coordinate their efforts.

The consequence is a program maze through which few people can navigate effectively. The child care system, so vital for the long-term well-being of Aboriginal children, provides one example of families being obliged to look to a myriad of different federal, provincial and territorial agencies for support. Similarly, the early generations of employment training programs most often were not coordinated with the priorities of employers or communities, and showed little regard for the individual's financial and family obligations. Very often these programs were preparing people for jobs that did not exist or preparing them to obtain a job, but not to retain that job.

The Government of Canada and individual Aboriginal communities have made some progress toward coordinating and integrating their efforts. HRDC and INAC have introduced a number of strategies to facilitate program integration, for example *Pathways*, the *Canadian Aboriginal Economic Development Strategy* (CAEDS) and the *Regional Bilateral Agreements* (RBA). The federal government's *Health Transfer Initiative* opens doors for communities to integrate their health and social programs.

The Government of Canada and individual Aboriginal communities have made progress toward coordinating their efforts.

These are all important steps in the right direction. Both the literature and key informant interviews suggest that further progress will require:

- ◆ a strong personal, bureaucratic and governmental commitment to coordination and integration;

- ◆ on-going efforts, across agencies and departments, to develop common objectives, to exchange information and to integrate the policy and program development processes; and

- ◆ innovative measures to align the funding and reporting practices of different departments.[4]

The experience of the Annie E. Casey Foundation in the United States suggests that current practices cannot be made more effective unless the systems that determine such practices are changed first. "[5]

Lesson 4: Effectiveness requires partnerships.

Policies and programs must fully incorporate Aboriginal priorities, traditions and values to be effective.

Achieving an effective social development strategy requires policies and programs to fully incorporate Aboriginal priorities, traditions and values. Yet certain government key informants suggested that, in some cases, the consultation processes designed to accommodate Aboriginal concerns have involved information sharing only. These processes have disguised the real planning which occurred behind closed doors.

Stakeholder involvement enhances the level of trust and the likelihood of consensus.

Meaningful consultation requires sufficient time to involve key stakeholders, to share information and to develop a consensus around the program parameters. And it requires adequate stakeholder involvement so as to enhance the level of trust and the likelihood of consensus.

Increasingly governments have recognized that the consultation process should begin early and should be clear about its objectives. The process should include both a full sharing of relevant information and efforts that allow Aboriginal people to involve the full range of community stakeholders and political leaders. The consultation process should be based upon mutual understanding, good faith and respect, and should be sufficiently flexible as to permit the partners to consider new issues as they arise.

Over the past decade, INAC, HRDC, the Department of Justice and other departments have all shown an increased commitment to partnering with

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4. National Crime Prevention Council, 1996(2): 23.

5. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995: 14.

Aboriginal organizations. Full partnerships are required if policies, programs and strategies are to take "Aboriginal concerns and sensitivities into account" and if they are to meet community needs and goals.[6] A full partnership means shared authority and responsibility, joint investment of resources, shared liability and risk-taking, and mutual benefit.

3. Specific Lessons

The preceding section outlined lessons relating to the general practices and approaches which contribute to effective social development strategies in Aboriginal communities. The following examines more specific lessons relating to program operations.

Working toward a vision

In developing an effective strategy, it is critical to begin with a comprehensive vision that can serve to inspire communities and attract those people who are willing to invest their time and effort. Furthermore experience in both Canada and the United States indicates that planning should be designed *"around [what] residents need, not around what available funding allows."* [7] Community-based efforts require funding policies that are not unduly restrictive. This allows communities to identify needs and to fund programs around a vision, not the other way around.

A comprehensive vision can inspire communities.

The process for developing policy and for planning programs within this vision has to recognize that these invariably require more time than expected. Rushing the process can compromise both the short and the long-term outcomes.

Finally, planning within a vision can never cease. Experience indicates that no plan, however well conceived, can continue to guide operations without significant rethinking and mid-course adjustments. This process itself can be constructive in that it requires people to rethink their actions and possibly their goals.

Building on assets

Both experience and the literature suggest that to be effective, community development efforts should be based upon assets rather than liabilities. The more tra-

7. United States, 1995: 32.

6. Canada/GNWT, 1996: 64

ditional approach of planning community initiatives only from the perspective of solving problems or meeting needs casts a negative tone on what should be an exciting and positive venture.

In contrast, the very act of identifying community assets can change the orientation of the developmental process. Building on assets is a community organizing tool that can generate optimism and motivate participation, collaboration and commitment.

The asset-building approach helps to ensure that community-based planning and action are positive and constructive. In such an environment, it becomes possible to recognize and treat existing problems without allowing them to appear so debilitating that they immobilize action.

Involving the community and achieving consensus

Meaningful community involvement is vital for ensuring that the strategy produces results that are sustainable through the long term. This involvement:

- ensures that the strategy addresses the community's own definition of needs rather than those identified by outside organizations;

- gives social and political legitimacy to the strategy and its initiatives;

- entices people to take an active role as staff or volunteers, and to develop a sense of ownership and commitment; and

- instills pride and builds the foundation for future and further efforts.

The goal of community involvement must be to foster a consensus about both the problems and their solutions. This requires ongoing dialogue and discussion, and the resources to continue this process for as long as is necessary.

Involving the community requires efforts to compensate for residents' inexperience in working as equals with -- or as leaders of -- professional representatives from outside agencies. Leaving control in outside hands skews the balance of power and compromises community control. Furthermore the experience of key informants indicates that significant effort is required to ensure all the different groups within a community are involved in the discussions and in the decisions.

To be effective, social development strategies must accommodate diversity. And they must reach out to those individuals and groups who most often do not become involved in community processes.

Funding

Funding is always one of the most critical and controversial issues in any community development or program initiative. First, communities invariably suggest the available funding is not adequate to meet the needs that exist, and indeed suggest the level of funding is determined by government fiat rather than by any community-based assessment of needs or opportunities. Second, the means used by government and Aboriginal organizations to allocate funding -- among regions and communities -- often causes controversy, competition and acrimony. Third, the concern for providing much needed direct service can result in inadequate funding being directed to support and administration, functions which are vital to an initiative's long-term sustainability.

The experience of key informants and the literature suggest that flexibility in allocating funds is the key to success. Canadian governments are building this flexibility into their funding arrangements with the *Regional Bilateral Agreements* and the *Health Transfer Initiative* being prime examples. Key informants suggest this approach should become the norm although they offer cautions about the risks inherent in it. The most important of these, they suggest, is the possibility of certain services -- day care for example -- not capturing the imagination of communities' political leadership and being lost as a funding priority.

There are no easy means for resolving the funding dilemma. There are two key elements however. The first is that Aboriginal people themselves take responsibility for funding decisions. The second is that the funding level needs to be sufficiently large as to establish legitimacy, to generate excitement, to provide leverage, to bring the community to the table and to keep it there.

Managing strategies: capacity, staff and training

Capacity, staff and training are critical elements in working toward success, and can be the difference between a developmental strategy achieving or not achieving its objectives.

Capacity and capability differ dramatically from community to community. It is important, therefore, that government and community roles be clearly defined and be consistent with the capacity which exists.

Staff training is possibly the most critical element in this process. While training may be provided through many different means, communities often rely upon mainstream institutions for this support. Some key informants suggested this approach is inadequate in that mainstream institutions may be imparting a set of values inconsistent with those of Aboriginal communities. This leaves staff without the tools they require for their work.

Finally community-based staff need the opportunity to come together to share experiences and to learn from each others' successes and challenges.

Accountability

Accountability is the obligation to account for responsibilities conferred. It is based upon the right of citizens to know what their governments intend to achieve and what they actually accomplish. An accountability framework requires communities and agencies:

- ◆ to set expectations, goals and objectives;

- ◆ to establish and maintain appropriate service standards;

- ◆ to monitor, evaluate and report on performance in a manner which is honest, accessible and transparent; and

- ◆ to reconsider and improve their efforts as appropriate.

Ensuring accountability poses a variety of challenges for Aboriginal communities.

Although the concept is relatively straightforward, ensuring accountability poses a variety of challenges for Aboriginal communities involved in developmental strategies. One challenge is being accountable to different authorities at the same time. Each authority may have different expectations, priorities, concerns and requirements.

A second challenge is the expectation that Aboriginal communities be accountable for programs over which they have little authority or control. A third challenge is ensuring accountability when the community is not sufficiently well organized to question the outcomes that are evident or to insist upon the outcomes which they were expecting.

Key informants and the literature suggest that federal requirements around accountability should be consistent with the size and scope of the program. They suggest that community-level structures and processes for ensuring accountability should be meaningful and effective. But there are very few, if any models available to guide communities and governments in this regard.

4.   Living Lessons

Ouje-Bougoumou Cree, Quebec

Between 1927 and 1986, due to the continual destruction of their villages, the Ouje-Bougoumou Cree were evacuated from their settlements half a dozen times,

becoming diasporic on their ancestral territory. They were left to live in shacks beside logging roads on the extreme margins of Canadian social, economic, and political life. They were the "forgotten Cree," facing complete social disintegration and living conditions almost incomprehensible in a developed and affluent society.

In 1975 the Ouje-Bougoumou Cree began building on the assets within their community: the foundation laid by the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement and their own commitment to self-determination. In 1989, after several years of negotiation with the Quebec government, the Ouje-Bougoumou Cree reached an agreement whereby the province agreed to contribute financially toward the construction of a new permanent village. With the Ouje-Bougoumou / Canada Agreement in May 1992, the Ouje-Bougoumou Cree obtained a similar financial commitment from the federal government. By 1995, the United Nations identified them as one of only fifty communities around the world best representing the ideals and objectives of that international organization. During this twenty-year period, the community:

- rebuilt its village using community labour and a design developed by the community itself in consultation with a leading Aboriginal architect;

- assumed responsibility for delivering its own health services and built a new healing centre;

- built its own youth centre, using the skills and commitment of its teenagers and young adults;

- developed an Elders' residence, day care centre, school and cultural centre;

- developed a unique, centralized method for heating all the community's homes using local resources; and

- is developing a sustainable local economy which incorporates not only wage labour but more traditional land-based activities.

The community building process in Ouje-Bougoumou incorporated all the lessons which have been identified in this report and can itself serve as a lesson for other communities about what needs to be done and what can be accomplished. First and foremost, residents refused to see themselves as victims and instead focused on their assets, strengths, and goals. With that foundation:

- community residents have planned everything that occurred and regular-ly host workshops to discuss the roles and responsibilities of community living, how they wish to organize their own affairs and by what values they wish to live. During one workshop residents discussed how tradi-

tional approaches for solving conflict could be integrated into a local law enforcement system. During another, they decided to include hunting breaks in the community's school and construction schedules so as to sustain their traditional ways;

- the community developed training programs to give people the specific skills they required for building their own homes. And the community developed an innovative home-ownership program which tied payments to income. The community gradually built a community housing fund to sustain further development; and

- the community made their school a centre of village life, serving as both a place of learning and of recreation.

The community acknowledges every achievement with a formal ceremony and holds frequent celebrations to allow people to know each other and to help.

5. Conclusions: Lessons in Comprehensive Social Development

Comprehensive social development strategies may be the only model for effectively addressing and resolving the fundamental issues confronting Aboriginal people and their communities. The model enables people to address the full range of community, social and economic needs at the same time, in a manner that is largely independent of the level of funding available. It relies primarily on the community itself.

Experience with and the literature on social development and community building offer clear lessons on how to proceed in this direction.

- **Strategies to build or rebuild communities must be comprehensive.** Impoverished communities are beset by multiple and interrelated challenges. All of these have to be addressed concurrently. Focusing upon only one or two of the issues will not bring about the fundamental change that is required through the long term. Each needs the other to be successful and each should be consistent with the community's broader and longer-term vision.

- **Support families and children.** Families and children are the very foundation of strong communities and should be the primary concern of community development efforts. A social development strategy should help families to help themselves.

- **Start from local conditions.** Every effort must be tailored to community scale and conditions, and should build on the diversity and strengths that exist. The best efforts flow from and adapt to local realities, building on community assets, capacities and strengths rather than focusing upon deficits and problems.

- **Community residents must own the developmental process.** Consultation is not enough. If self-reliance is to replace dependency, social development requires the community itself to play the central role in devising and implementing strategies for its own improvement.

- **Foster broad community participation.** Many strategies and programs have become so professionalized that they alienate the people they serve. Social development requires that programs and policies be shaped by community residents themselves. Success depends upon broad community involvement and leaders must continually reach out to involve more and more people, including those who are rarely consulted.

- **Forge partnerships through collaboration.** Social development requires all sectors to work together in an atmosphere of trust, cooperation and respect.
- **Recognize systemic barriers.** Racism and even the very structure of many mainstream programs constitute barriers to social and economic development. A social development strategy has to confront these barriers and promote equity for all groups.

Given the experience of the past and the conditions of the present, only a comprehensive social development strategy offers promise for the future.

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