

1. Introduction

This paper positions intersectoral action as one essential strategy for improving population health in Canada. It illustrates how action within and between sectors at local, regional, provincial, national and international levels, which has active public and political support, can lead to gains in population health and reduction of persistent health inequalities among certain groups of the population.

The focus of the paper is intersectoral action for health. That is, the entry point is action by partners from many different sectors to ensure the healthiest population possible. Enhancing population health is a key goal of the health sector, and this paper has been produced to help people in that sector become more focused and effective in their efforts to promote and support intersectoral action. But health, broadly conceived as having physical, emotional, social, economic and spiritual dimensions, is a basis for wellbeing and quality of life. As such, it is a resource for everyday living that is sought by all, and is thus a key goal of other sectors as well. It is this common purpose which can motivate and sustain effective intersectoral action that ultimately enhances the health and wellbeing of all parts and levels of Canadian society.

Cooperation and collaboration between organizations and sectors has long been a strategy for improving health and wellbeing. Since the 1970s, there has been a growing emphasis by governments and many other partners on improving the health of Canadians by focusing on factors in addition to health care services. This has included action by a multitude of partners to promote and support population health through improvements in living and working conditions, and through strengthened personal and collective control over health decisions.

Much has been accomplished, and much has been learned from almost three decades of experience with action to improve population health. This experience continues to be consolidated, written about, shared and built upon. Increasingly, applied research is clarifying the factors which enable and facilitate effective intersectoral action. As well, the strong and growing evidence about the importance of key health determinants such as income, social status, education, employment, social support networks and physical environments is driving the need for partners from many sectors and levels to work together to improve population health and wellbeing.

It is therefore timely to bring together current information and thinking about successful intersectoral action. The purpose of this discussion paper is to illustrate why intersectoral action for health is crucial; outline the potential benefits and the factors that enable its success; and suggest future directions and next steps. Throughout the paper, the term “intersectoral action for health” is used as a simple way of conveying the concept of action by many sectors and partners to enhance population health and wellbeing, by influencing the broad determinants of health.

Intersectoral
Action
... Towards
Population Health

“Investing in population health offers benefits in three main areas: increased prosperity, reduced expenditures on health and social problems, and overall social stability and wellbeing for Canadians.

The prosperity of a nation and the health of its citizens are inextricably linked. Many studies have shown the most powerful indicator of population health is the prosperity of the society within which people live, with an equitable distribution of wealth. At the same time, a healthy population is a major contributor to a vibrant economy.”

Strategies for Population Health: Investing in the Health of Canadians, FPT Ministers of Health, 1994

This paper is intended as a tool to stimulate thinking, discussion and action. It is not a detailed guide for designing and implementing intersectoral action, although it includes concrete advice and examples. The paper is primarily targeted at policy and decision makers, program planners and developers, and program managers in the health sector. The information it contains should help people in these roles become more effective catalysts, leaders, and supporters of intersectoral action. The paper should also be of interest to those in other sectors—since it will clarify for them the health sector’s intentions and interests, and help provide a basis for joint action.

2. Intersectoral Action for Health . . . What Is It?

Definition

Intersectoral action makes possible the joining of forces, knowledge and means to understand and solve complex issues whose solutions lie outside the capacity and responsibility of a single sector. It can be both a strategy and a process. Intersectoral action can be used to promote and achieve shared goals in a number of areas, for

“A recognized relationship between part or parts of the health sector with part or parts of another sector which has been formed to take action on an issue to achieve health outcomes . . . in a way that is more effective, efficient or sustainable than could be achieved by the health sector acting alone.”

WHO International Conference on Intersectoral Action for Health, 1997

example policy, research, planning, practice and funding. It may be implemented through a myriad of activities including advocacy, legislation, community projects, policy and program action. It may take different forms such as cooperative initiatives, alliances, coalitions or partnerships. Although intersectoral action may take many forms, experience shows it is most successful when characterized by a dynamic and flexible process that is perceived as a “win-win” situation by all participants.

Intersectoral action relies on functions also used in other processes such as community development or strategic planning. That is, it may include needs assessment, identification and involvement of key players, citizen involvement, clarification of values and purpose, development of objectives, planning, budgeting, and evaluation of results. What distinguishes it from other processes is the explicit intention of participants from different sectors, and different levels and parts of a particular sector, to address a common purpose.

Elements of Intersectoral Action

Intersectoral action can take various forms, and include many different types and levels of participants. The following framework clarifies the way in which the elements of intersectoral action are conceptualized in this paper.

Sectors. This term can refer to one or both of:

- * Broad fields of activity—health, justice, education, social services, finance, agriculture, environment, etc. Although there is no definitive list, there appears to be a common understanding of what the main sectors are. However,

the distinctions between them are not absolute, and certain types of organizations or initiatives may not fit clearly into any one sector. The different labels are useful primarily to convey the idea of a common area of endeavour, not to draw arbitrary boundaries.

- * General categories of partners—within the above sectors, there are different categories of organizations and partners, distinguished from one another mainly on the basis of their mandate and method of financing and operation. Again, there is no definitive list. But the three main categories are usually taken to be the public or government sector, the voluntary sector and the private sector. Within the non-government sector there are many different types of groups and partners, for example business, professional, consumer, cultural, communities of faith, etc.

Levels. Within the above sectors, there may be partners at different levels. Depending on the context and the nature of the intersectoral action, levels may be defined in different ways.

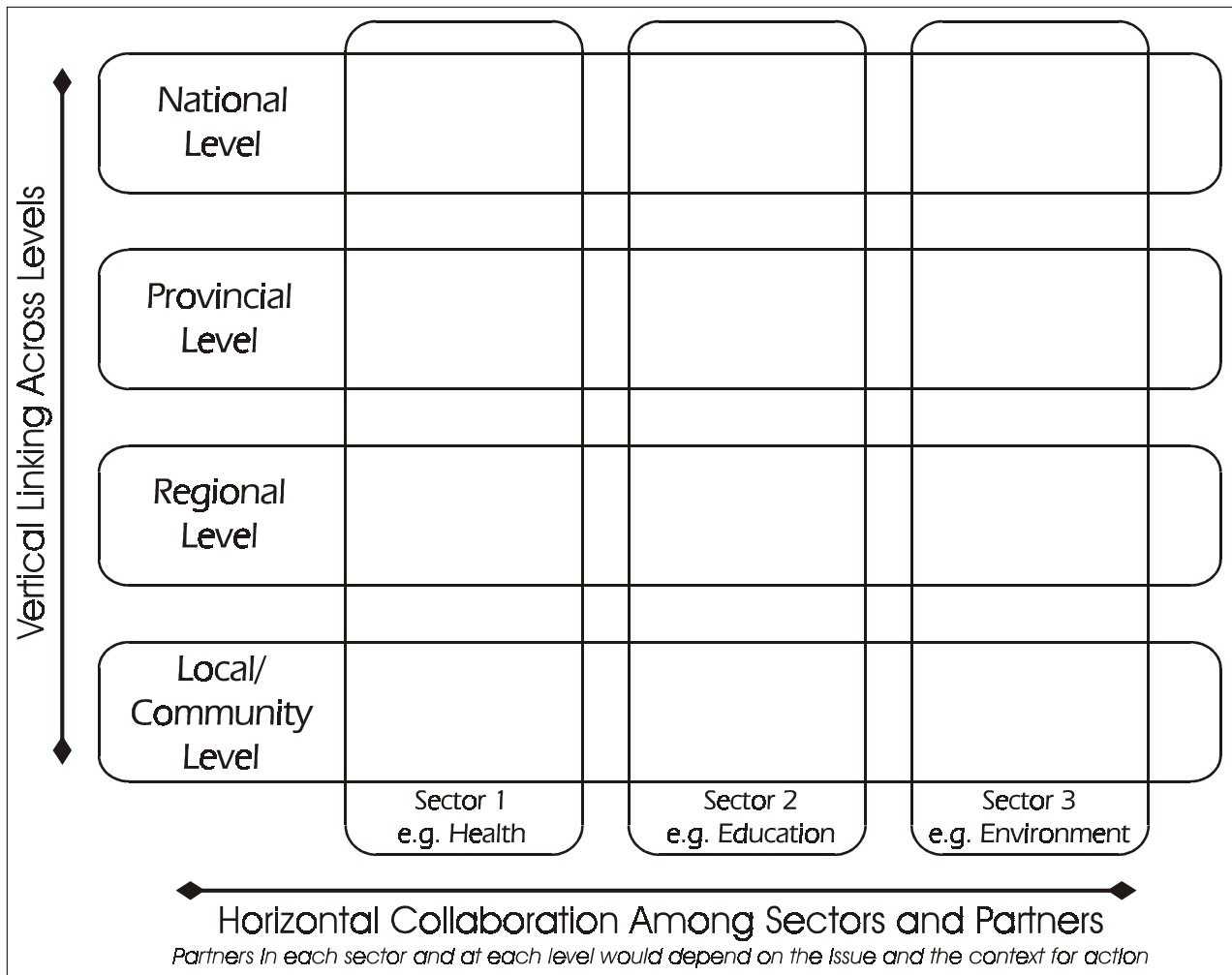
- * Geography: e.g. local/community, regional, provincial, national, international levels.
- * Levels of government: e.g. municipal, provincial/territorial, federal.
- * Levels within organizations: e.g. senior decision level, service delivery level.

Experience and evidence indicate that intersectoral action is most successful when it includes vertical as well as horizontal linking and collaboration. This maximizes the likelihood of reinforcing and synergistic effects.

- * Horizontal collaboration occurs across sectors (e.g. social services, environment, health); and also across different areas or “sub-sectors” within a particular sector (e.g. environmental health, mental health, acute care and public health in the health sector). It generally refers to involvement of different individuals or groups that act at the same level, e.g. collaboration between partners at the national level or between partners at the community level.
- * Vertical alignment of purpose, activity and support links different levels within a sector, e.g. municipal, provincial and federal levels of government. Of particular importance is vertical linking that helps ensure that action at the more central levels enables and reinforces action at the community level, and that community action suggests and stimulates action at the central level.

The specific individuals and groups that participate within and across sectors, and the types of levels that are vertically linked, depend on the nature of the issue being addressed and the context in which action occurs. However, it is important to take an *inclusive approach* that includes all of the key players—horizontally and vertically—who are needed to enable and facilitate the desired results. The benefits of vertical as well as horizontal linking are expanded upon later in the paper, in the section on conditions for success.

The graphic below illustrates this idea of horizontal collaboration and vertical linking, in a case where the vertical linking is between geographical levels. In this example, a variety of public, voluntary and private sector partners from the health, education and environment fields might participate in initiatives at the national, provincial, regional and local levels, depending on the nature and complexity of issue being addressed.



3. Why A Renewed Emphasis on Intersectoral Action Now?

The current emphasis on intersectoral action for health is being driven by many factors, particularly the growing consensus about the importance of key determinants of health which are the purview of many different sectors; the need to reduce persistent health status disparities; our increasing understanding of the conditions which enable effective intersectoral action; and a positive climate for action.

Address the Broad Determinants of Health

There is growing evidence and consensus about the key factors which determine population health and wellbeing. These factors include income, social status, education, social support networks, employment and working conditions, physical environments, personal health practices and coping skills, biology and genetic endowment, health services, and healthy child development.

The capacity to influence most determinants of health lies outside the health sector, and in fact outside any one particular sector. Clearly, improving population health, wellbeing and quality of life requires the involvement of many sectors. Intersectoral action is needed both to ensure the maintenance and improvement of the health status of all Canadians, and to reduce inequalities in health status that are linked to disparities between groups on such factors as income, education and employment opportunities.

Access to effective health care services is a key determinant of health. Ensuring this access is a major responsibility of the health sector. However, the limits in improving population health of a health system that focuses on the treatment of illness have long been recognized. Many important and influential documents have addressed this point over the past 25 years. They include *Perspectives on the Health of Canadians* (1974); the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* (1986); *Population Health Strategies: Investing in the Health of Canadians* (1994); and *Intersectoral Action for Health: A Cornerstone for Health for All in the Twenty First Century* (1997). Yet, action to apply this understanding has had only very modest success, and the health care system continues to receive the lion's share of health sector resources and attention.

A health strategy that focuses mainly on health care services will not provide the results needed to improve population health and reduce health disparities.

In the face of growing pressures on health care services and their funding, a renewed effort by the health sector is needed now to provide leadership for action to address the broad determinants of health.

Reduce Persistent Health Status Disparities

Some groups of Canadians continue to experience significant disparities in health status. For example, the rate of low birthweight babies born to women with low incomes continues to be unacceptably high in Canada. Many studies show that low birthweight infants achieve less in their education and employment, have more health

In 1847 Rudolf Virchow, one of Germany's preeminent pathologists, was asked by the Berlin City council to investigate an epidemic of typhus. Virchow concluded that the cause of the epidemic was "mismanagement of the region by the Berlin government". His recommendations were far reaching, including shifting the burden of taxation from the poor to the rich, a program of road construction, improvement of agriculture, and establishment of farming cooperatives. The Berlin council was unhappy with Virchow's report, criticizing him for producing a political document rather than the scientific report they had expected. Virchow responded with his famous statement which still resonates 150 years later: "Medicine is a social science and politics is nothing but medicine writ large!" He noted that for medicine to be successful, it must enter political and social life, and asserted that, "If disease is an expression of individual life under unfavourable circumstances, then epidemics must be indicative of mass disturbances".

and social problems throughout their lives, and are more likely to die prematurely. Another example is infant mortality. After thirty years of continuous improvements, Canada's infant mortality rates have plateaued and even risen in some areas. Certain parts of Canada have infant mortality rates that are worse than some third world countries.

The gaps on many different health status indicators between people living in more and less advantaged circumstances are not explained by differential access to health care services. It is unacceptable for a country like Canada to continue to tolerate these health status disparities, and action to improve the situation will only be possible through concerted intersectoral action.

Take Advantage of the Growing Evidence Base

Although the importance of intersectoral action for health has been accepted for many years, it has often been difficult to implement. At the same time, there have been successes, and much has been learned. The growing evidence base makes a renewed emphasis very timely, although

The *Report on the Health of Canadians* (1996) shows that, although Canada enjoys a standard of health that is among the best in the world, it is not equally shared by all groups in Canadian society. There are considerable disparities in health status by age, gender and geographic region. People who are more advantaged through education and standard of living have better health than those who are disadvantaged. The *Report* confirms that an intersectoral effort involving all levels of government, non-government organizations, the private sector, and community organizations is basic to the maintenance and improvement of the health of Canadians, and the reduction of disparities in health status.

much more research is still required. The current evidence base primarily addresses the factors that contribute to effective, sustained intersectoral action *processes* (e.g. Fortin et al, 1994; Lemieux et al, 1999). But there is also a small but growing body of research which demonstrates that intersectoral action leads to improved health *outcomes* (e.g. Kuhn et al, 1999).

As well, the growing body of knowledge about how the determinants of health operate and interact is making it more possible to design specific interventions targeted at the variables most likely to improve health in particular groups and populations. The National Forum on Health Determinants of Health Working Group (1996) pulled together a considerable amount of this information. And there are increasing efforts by various partners to stimulate and support research on the determinants of health. The resulting knowledge will further expand our capacity for intersectoral collaboration to improve population health—at the level of policy and practice.

Respond to an Increasingly Receptive Climate for Intersectoral Action

There is a growing understanding among partners in many different sectors about the implications of the trend to economic, political and social interdependence at the global, national and all other levels. This interconnectedness is leading to a new way of doing business that emphasizes horizontal relationships and collaboration. Attitudes, organizational structures and operating mechanisms inside and outside government are changing to adapt to this new reality, which helps create a favourable climate for intersectoral action.

Another factor creating a receptive climate is an increasing focus in various sectors on topics and concepts that are closely related to population health. These include social resilience, economic and social sustainability, civic society, social cohesion and citizen engagement. Although the language and policy paradigms may differ from those in the health sector, these related topic areas provide an entry point for the health sector to begin to align purposes and seek partners.

As well, the successes of many local communities across Canada in developing intersectoral initiatives to address health and quality of life issues have created an interest in other communities, and among partners at more central levels. Public health organizations have already established considerable credibility as initiators, facilitators and participants in intersectoral action for health, especially at the local level. This track record positions public health professionals as a strategic resource for furthering intersectoral action at all levels. These factors are reinforced by public opinion research which shows that citizens understand very well the key factors that influence their health and quality of life, and expect their governments at all levels to cooperate with one another and with non-government partners to ensure health and wellbeing.

The ability of players in the health sector to capitalize on this potentially receptive climate and stimulate intersectoral action for health will depend on their capacity to see issues from the point of view of other sectors, to find intersections of interest, and to work on common ground. It will not be sufficient to invite others to join in the health agenda. The challenge is to find the congruent issues and agendas. Conditions for success in doing this are discussed in Section 5 of this paper.

4. What Are The Potential Benefits?

There is no doubt that intersectoral action for health has worked. There are many success stories at international, national and local levels. For example, publicly funded immunization programs that involve the health, education, and in some cases the social services systems in Canada have been successful in reducing the incidence and prevalence of communicable diseases and their complications. Healthy communities projects all across Canada and in many other countries have brought about changes that resolved health problems and greatly improved the quality of life of residents. Canada's National Family Violence Initiative brought together seven federal government departments with provincial and territorial governments, community groups, professional associations and private sector organizations to develop an intersectoral response for prevention of family violence. Results include increased public awareness, implementation of a range of health, social service, criminal justice, and housing services, and networks of partners who continue to work together. Other successful initiatives are presented as case histories in *The Canadian Experience of Intersectoral Collaboration for Health Gains* (CPHA, 1997).

Although there is still much to be learned about effective intersectoral action, we know enough to take action now. There are significant potential benefits to be realized from adopting, supporting and sustaining an intersectoral action approach, including:

- * An enhanced capacity to tackle and resolve complex health and social problems which have eluded individual sectors for decades, resulting in improved population health and wellbeing, and reduced demand for health care and social services in future.
- * A pooling of resources, knowledge and expertise, and development of networks, that will allow partners to address current problems more effectively, and also position them to respond better to future issues.
- * Reductions in duplication of effort among different partners and sectors.
- * New collaborative and inclusive ways of working together that will enable partners to contribute to improvements in social cohesion, increased opportunities for sustainable human development, and a more dynamic and vibrant society.

Ways and means are becoming more available for creating the necessary conditions for success and transforming these potential benefits into reality. The next section of this paper summarizes these.

5. Conditions for Success

Successful intersectoral initiatives are, by their nature, challenging to achieve. They require various partners to work together toward a common end despite their different mandates and goals, and multiple visions, agendas, values and organizational structures and cultures. Each sector and organization has its respective organizational demands and levels of authority which need to be accommodated. Participants must work through a myriad of relationships among individuals, boards and bureaucracies. There will inevitably be conflicting values and expectations that require adjustment, negotiation and compromises.

To help overcome these challenges, certain conditions are necessary for intersectoral action to succeed. Almost three decades of experience with intersectoral action for health have provided many lessons. The following is a consolidation of the key success factors that have been identified through research and experience. These conditions for success provide guidance for those who are at the beginning stages of an intersectoral collaboration initiative, as well as those who are already involved but are looking for ways to strengthen or rejuvenate the initiative.

Shared Values, Interests and Alignment of Purpose

Those who are interested in stimulating intersectoral action for health need to continually seek out common underlying values and interests among potential partners, and to work towards alignment of purpose.

Effective collaboration between different sectors and organizations is more likely when participants share values or interests. People in the health sector typically work on intersectoral action at least partly because they value health. However, other sectors may conceptualize a similar value differently, for example, as social and

economic wellbeing, quality of life, or sustainable human development. Or they may be attracted to a particular project because of an interest they have in common with other sectors. For example, community businesses may be concerned about youth crime, and could therefore be potential partners in initiatives such as youth recreation or training programs. These same initiatives will contribute to improved youth health, as well as to the goals of other sectors such as employment, education and justice.

A clearly articulated purpose, based on shared values and interests, can inspire tremendous energy from a variety of sectors. The purpose must be sufficiently bold and expansive that each partner can see how participation will help them to achieve their mandate, as well as make a contribution to the greater good. It has to be perceived as a “win-win” situation whereby each party gains something, and not “imperialism” by any one sector to induce others to help it fulfil its own agenda.

This process of seeking shared values and interests and aligning purpose is facilitated if there is consensus on information about the nature and magnitude of the issue to be addressed. The quality of the information is not necessarily the key factor in determining whether a consensus is developed or not. Although good quality information is important, so is the congruence of the information with prevailing values. For example, the evidence on the positive health and social benefits of quality children’s day care is considered very strong by health and social policy analysts. Yet, this information has led to implementation of universal quality child care in some places but not others. In Québec, this evidence is congruent with Québec values about state support for children and parenting, and has facilitated joint action for the development of a provincial universal children’s day care program. In other jurisdictions, many people share the value that the care of children is predominately the responsibility of their parents. As a result there is no consensus on the benefits of quality children’s day care, and an ongoing examination of different options to enhance child health and development.

Supportive Policy Environment

A population health approach in general, and intersectoral action for health in particular, is dependent upon political support and a public policy environment that facilitates collective action. This is the case both because governments are almost always major partners in intersectoral action, and because politics and public policy also affect non-government partners.

The Quebec Network of Healthy Cities and Towns is a network of 110 municipalities which have entered into collaborative community projects that address, for example, youth drug abuse, vandalism and crime; wellbeing of the elderly; housing; and family policy. It is regarded world-wide as one of the most successful examples of collaborative community action for health. Its success lies, in large part, in the common value and clear purpose of improving quality of life for community members, as defined by the community members themselves.

In Alberta, a common concern about the health impact on people and animals of natural gas solution flaring enabled the Clear Air Strategic Alliance of Alberta to be formed. This multisectoral coalition, with 18 members from industry, non-government organizations and three government departments, agreed on action to ameliorate the situation in the short term, and eliminate the practice of flaring in the longer term.

Research studies of intersectoral initiatives, as well as anecdotal evidence, confirm that success is greatly enhanced by a direct link to the political level, either through the involvement of politicians in the initiative (e.g. membership on a lead committee), or through a clear liaison to the political level overseen by senior administrative officials. This acknowledges the political nature of most issues that are tackled through intersectoral action, and also recognizes the importance of political commitment in motivating the participation of partners, and helping ensure access to the necessary supports to initiate and sustain the initiative.

Effective intersectoral action requires that progress be made according to the specific dynamics of the different groups and sectors involved. Most often it takes time for a group to start acting as an effective alliance. Many intersectoral activities have long time horizons, with positive health outcomes unlikely for a decade or more. The budgeting cycles and the political and policy timeframes of governments may not mesh well with these realities. Political support, including direct involvement of politicians where possible, can help overcome this difficulty.

The public policy environment is an important factor to consider when designing intersectoral action initiatives. One key aspect of this is the impact of the economic climate on public policy. As a general rule, governments pay more attention to health or environmental impacts of policy decisions in times of economic growth and budget surplus. As well, at times of economic security, Canadians are more likely to support programs which benefit more vulnerable members of society. For example, with a positive economic climate, there are fewer barriers to government replacement of tobacco sponsorship money or implementation of new healthy child development policies. As well, in the climate of a positive fiscal environment, government departments may be more likely to cooperate. New money or bridge funding are very useful tools for stimulating collaboration between government departments and with non-government partners.

Another important aspect of the public policy environment is the policy balance between the protection of individual rights and protection and wellbeing of the collectivity. If a society or government tilts too far towards preservation of individual rights, it may lack the political and institutional support for effective intersectoral action to solve complicated social problems.

Those who are developing intersectoral action initiatives must recognize the realities and characteristics of the policy environment, and adapt their initiative accordingly. It is often difficult to influence the policy environment, especially in the short term. However, intersectoral initiatives may set out specifically to create a more supportive policy environment for the longer term. Regardless, it is crucial to identify and capitalize upon the positive and supportive policy elements that do exist. And elements that initially do not seem positive may turn out to be so. For example, some initiatives have discovered that a tight fiscal environment and budget restrictions have facilitated innovative collaborative solutions to long-standing problems.

Engagement of Key Players

Engagement of the key players and potential partners, at the very beginning of the process, is a cornerstone of the success of any intersectoral initiative. It is very important to consider partners not just from other sectors, but also from other parts and at other levels of one's own sector. The receptivity of potential partners will be enhanced by seeking common values or interests and shared purpose, as discussed above.

Research on coalitions indicates that one of the most important factors in motivating participation is the possibility of promoting causes that members believe in. So those factors should be emphasized in the engagement process. Research also suggests that success is enhanced when members are selected to bring varied and complementary assets (i.e. the means or resources that enable them to influence each other and accomplish results) to the table. It is also important to find ways to maximize the overall advantages to be gained by the different players, and to promote the sense that advantages and influence are shared among the members. Compatibility in attitudes and social outlook among members, and positive personal ties among the main members, also enhance success.

The intersectoral actions that achieve the best results are those which ensure appropriate linkages between levels within sectors, particularly between the local and more central levels, as well as across sectors. So a strategy for engaging key players at multiple levels within a sector, as well as from different sectors, should be considered. This may not always be appropriate or feasible, especially in the early stages. But the possibilities and opportunities, either in the short or longer term, should be assessed.

Horizontal and Vertical Linking

As described earlier in Section 2, effective intersectoral action has two dimensions. The horizontal dimension links sectors (e.g. health, social services, agriculture, etc. and/or public, voluntary and private sectors) at a given level. The vertical dimension links different levels within each sector (e.g. local, regional, provincial). Both dimensions have their own dynamics and conditions for success. Both are important in any given intersectoral action.

Horizontal collaboration is most effective in bringing together the diverse knowledge and means to understand and solve complex issues whose solutions lie outside the capacity and responsibility of a single sector. It can help overcome the reality that, although population health and wellbeing are influenced by and are of interest to government and non-government partners in most or all sectors, policies and actions tend to be developed within particular sectors or subsystems. This results in fragmentation of effort, and prevents the synergies and reinforcing effects that could be

In response to an HIV epidemic in Vancouver's downtown east side, particularly among those who are injection drug users, a diverse group of people, including community members and agencies and representatives of different sectors from three levels of government, is collaborating to address the problem. The initiative is considering action on key conditions such as poverty, lack of safe and affordable housing, social isolation, and lack of access to appropriate and integrated health and social support services. An agreement between three levels of government to support long-term sustainable economic development for the areas, with a particular focus on housing and employment issues, is being developed.

achieved through a joint approach. The organization of government into policy portfolios accentuates the problem—both for government partners and for their non-government colleagues. Individual departments and organizations tend to have their own culture and language, which can hinder effective communication and joint action. Intersectoral action is not a magic bullet that will automatically overcome these challenges. But it offers a mechanism for identifying and acting on joint interests in a way that is advantageous for all partners. Success is most likely when an initiative can frame an issue so that players from various sectors can clearly see their stake in it, and the potential benefits of participation.

Vertical linking enhances success by helping to ensure alignment of purpose and coordination of effort within an organization or sector. Horizontal collaboration at a particular level (e.g. at the community level) will be greatly strengthened if links can also be made with action at other levels. This may mean ensuring effective links between different parts or layers of an organization (e.g. between front line service delivery and head office policy making), between levels of government (e.g. municipal and provincial), or between geographic levels (e.g. provincial and national).

Vertical linking between local and more central levels builds upon and reinforces the strengths of both. Local collaborative action is most effective in dealing with quality

Some of Canada's success with intersectoral action on tobacco control has occurred when different sub-sectors and levels of the health sector have facilitated and reinforced one another's actions. Local coalitions including public health, community health centres, regional health care staff, and voluntary health organizations have joined together to push for municipal smoking bylaws. But they have also put pressure on their federal and provincial politicians for action at those policy-making levels by advocating for and coalescing public support for tobacco control. When health ministers have the political strength of effective local action to draw upon, they can then bring forward provincial and federal policies.

of life issues in the community. Action at higher levels tends to have more impact on the overall policies, structures and social institutions that influence population health and its determinants. As such, central action may remove barriers to, enable and stimulate local change, and provide a more supportive policy and operating environment for community action. Similarly, successful local projects can push action to higher levels, providing stronger political support for overall policies and actions that enhance population health. If this political support results in policy or other changes that facilitate more successful local initiatives, then a positive feedback loop can be created to maintain and enhance activity at both community and higher levels.

A particular initiative may start at a certain level and in a certain area within or between organizations. The

entry point can be anywhere. The challenge then becomes to link it horizontally to other key areas within the organization and sector, and to other sectors; and vertically in the hierarchy and to other appropriate levels. If this can be accomplished, the initiative will have support from all sides. In successful initiatives, linking is often done progressively, with a small group initiating a process and then working horizontally and vertically to spread the idea and to enlarge the alliances.

While there are many common factors that enable success in both horizontal and vertical actions, including shared values and purpose, trust, good will and continuity

of relationship, there are also differences. For example, because participation in horizontal collaborations is most often discretionary, decision making tends to be collegial or consensual. On the other hand, vertical linking within an organization may occur in the context of a more formal decision approach based on hierarchy and chain of command. Blending these two decision models in a single initiative can be challenging. A further challenge can arise when enhancing vertical linking in decentralized organizations or systems where there is not a clear hierarchical reporting relationship, and where consensus is more appropriate and effective than direction and control. Participants in intersectoral action that includes a horizontal and a vertical dimension can maximize success by explicitly recognizing different decision making requirements the two dimensions may have, and ensuring that appropriate mechanisms and processes are established and harmonized.

Investment in the Alliance Building Process

Successful intersectoral initiatives are characterized by investment of time and resources in the alliance building process. Ensuring that partners forge a consensus during the planning phase about elements such as desired outcomes, measures of success, leadership, operating processes, contribution of resources, methods of resolving conflicts, recognition and rewards prevents or reduces problems in the implementation phase. Such a planning process also fosters effective working relationships and consensus oriented decision making from the outset.

Research indicates there is no single model for effective coalitions. Regardless of the model, the key factors seem to be development of consensus and trust during the planning phase; and access by partners to practical information and tools to guide decisions during planning, and tools to help them assess factors that contribute to effectiveness once a coalition is established (Kuhn et al, 1999).

Focus on Concrete Objectives and Visible Results

A key lesson from successful intersectoral collaborations is that the focus should be on achieving visible results rather than setting up elaborate structures and complex coordinating and decision making processes. Objectives should focus on concrete action and specific, visible deliverables, with some clear results that can be achieved in the short term. This is more likely to motivate and sustain intersectoral action than an attempt to develop an overarching plan to meet laudable but vague goals. Success requires a strong action orientation, although it is also very important to ensure simple but effective coordinating processes and supports for action.

Saskatchewan established the Associate & Assistant Deputy Ministers Forum on Human Services in 1994. The development of the forum was spurred by a 1993 investigation of 27 child deaths, which concluded that there were multiple causes and that broad social policy initiatives were required to address the issues. The forum has focused on promoting better service integration as opposed to joint governance. It links to 9 regional committees which work to take the philosophy of collaboration closer to the operational level. These committees are now expanding beyond government membership to include such partners as health districts, school divisions, regional colleges, tribal councils, police, and housing authorities. The forum supports a number of initiatives including Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children.

Shared Leadership and Accountability

Leadership of intersectoral action initiatives can be a challenge. In successful collaborative initiatives, leadership is almost always more a case of guidance and influence than of control. Experience has shown it is not necessary or appropriate that any given sector always have the lead. For example, in intersectoral action for health, partners from the health sector could play various roles. They may lead, but a more appropriate role in some cases may be to facilitate, mediate, coordinate or integrate. As well, different partners may assume different roles at different phases of the initiative. In successful coalitions, participation is a matter of co-action, of taking appropriate roles that will enable working together on issues of common interest.

As well, it is crucial that no one partner in a coalition be too strongly focussed on the agenda of their own organization, as common objectives and collective gains are more

Initiatives by governments to develop overall business plans such as Nova Scotia's *Government by Design* build intersectoral action and shared leadership into the system and provide a framework for collaboration. Each department recognizes and is accountable for shared goals and outcomes, and realizes mutual gains.

important than individual interests. However, this collective orientation will only be possible when the common objectives adequately address the interests of all partners. Accountability for achieving the common objectives, and recognition and rewards for success, must also be shared.

Team Building and Supports

The most successful collaborative initiatives are those which develop and maintain a stable team over time. This is facilitated when members know and trust each other and have similar interests and values. Clarity about roles and responsibilities of respec-

tive members is also very important. As well, teams that accomplish results in a sustained way tend to have members who are as free as possible to act as individuals, and whose participation is not tied too closely only to the agenda of their own organization.

Decision making in successful coalitions is usually collegial or consensual, and the team "culture" and operating methods need to recognize that. At the same time, members need conflict resolution skills and mechanisms for dealing with contentious issues, and in these cases, more formal decision mechanisms may be needed.

Initiating and maintaining coalitions requires substantial skill, and sufficient human and financial resources to ensure they are able to operate effectively. They also require defined planning processes and practical planning tools that are appropriate to the scope and nature of the initiative. Members must have the ability to commit resources to the joint work, and it must be possible to harmonize the planning, budgeting and accountability requirements of their respective organizations sufficiently to enable joint work to occur.

6. Moving Ahead ... Steps to Foster Intersectoral Action for Health

Although there is solid consensus on the need for intersectoral action to enhance population health and wellbeing, as well as a growing body of knowledge about what

it will take to succeed and an evident commitment to action by many players, there is still a lack of effective follow through.

To make further progress, action in four main areas is necessary. These four areas are presented below, with a few initiatives suggested for each as a stimulus for discussion and further work. Some will be more difficult to accomplish than others, and all will require time. However, there are concrete steps that players at different levels and in different parts of the health and other sectors can take now to move ahead.

➤ **Develop a strong information and evidence base to stimulate and enable effective intersectoral action.**

- * Synthesize existing information about impacts of, and success factors for intersectoral action, in ways that are practical and useful for senior decision makers and practitioners.
- * Encourage and fund interdisciplinary research into the determinants of health and their interactions—to strengthen the knowledge base about the types of interventions required from different sectors.
- * Support action research into success factors, with a particular emphasis on combining horizontal collaboration with vertical linking. Build on the experience already gained at the community level.
- * Require an intersectoral approach to research and evaluation in appropriate sectors.

➤ **Ensure people and organizations in the health sector have the capacity to be effective catalysts, leaders and partners in intersectoral action.**

- * Review, refine and articulate the role and responsibilities of players in the health sector in relation to intersectoral action for health.
- * Invest in processes that build, with key non-health sectors, shared values, purpose, trust and leadership. Give priority to continuity of relationships, developing new ones and being prepared to let others lead.
- * Identify, and/or develop in collaboration with others, broad strategic directions and goals that act as the basis for win-win action by a variety of sectors. Focus on common values and expectations, while ensuring each sector can

Conditions for Success: A Checklist

- ✓ Seek shared values and interests and alignment of purpose among partners and potential partners.
- ✓ Ensure political support, build on positive factors in the policy environment.
- ✓ Engage key partners at the very beginning, be inclusive.
- ✓ Ensure appropriate horizontal linking across sectors as well as vertical linking of levels within sectors.
- ✓ Invest in the alliance building process, work for consensus at the planning stage.
- ✓ Focus on concrete objectives and visible results.
- ✓ Ensure leadership, accountability and rewards are shared among partners.
- ✓ Build stable teams of people who work well together and have appropriate supports.

determine its contribution to achieving the common goals based on their own interests and potential benefits to them.

- * Capitalize on the skills and relationships within communities, and between sectors, that have been established through public health infrastructures.
 - * Make intersectoral action a core criterion of population health funding programs whenever possible: require involvement of other sectors very early in the project; adapt time restrictions in existing funding mechanisms to recognize intersectoral action requires time to develop; support networking of resources such as leaders or champions, for development of knowledge and expertise; fund development of practical models and tools for intersectoral action.
 - * Ensure learning and development opportunities to enable practitioners to understand and implement intersectoral action.
- **Assist senior decision and policy makers in all sectors to understand the benefits of, and to foster intersectoral action in research, policy and practice in their sector.**
- * Construct well argued cases, supported by good information and evidence, for intersectoral action for health—as an investment in sustainable economic and human development. Disseminate the information to potential partners at senior levels in key sectors. Follow up to strengthen contacts and build networks of receptive partners.
 - * Identify and document commonalities among sectors on goals, policy issues and priorities related to population health and wellbeing. Disseminate the information. Establish forums to discuss common purposes, develop joint goals, and identify opportunities for ensuring a health perspective in public policy.
 - * Identify policy and structural factors that will help ensure communities are empowered to make creative and innovative decisions for action to meet their unique needs. Communicate this information to senior decision and policy makers, and advocate for provision of the necessary resources and supports, and removal of inappropriate constraints in central policies and requirements.
- **Develop practical models, tools and mechanisms to support implementation of intersectoral action.**
- * Develop and fund demonstration projects to test different models and approaches for intersectoral action at all levels, with an emphasis on models for linking action at community and more central levels. Ensure concrete outcomes and clear deliverables.
 - * Develop tools for planning and priority setting in intersectoral initiatives that will be useful to, and accepted by, players from various sectors and levels.
 - * Develop a practitioner guide for intersectoral action towards population health.

- * Develop and strengthen the capacity to provide professional and technical assistance for design and implementation of intersectoral initiatives. Supports could include training, consultation on available models and tools, access to information on experiences and successes of other initiatives, and facilitation of networking among projects addressing similar issues.

7. Conclusion

This paper is intended primarily to stimulate discussion and action by partners throughout the health sector. The paper could also serve as the basis for discussion and consultation with potential partners in other sectors. By presenting a framework for thinking about intersectoral action for health, outlining the potential benefits, and summarizing key conditions for success, it should provide practical information and guidance to assist readers immediately. At the same time, the ideas for action to move ahead presented in Section 6 offer a starting point for discussion, priority setting and planning of future initiatives.

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Intersectoral
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... Towards
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