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Developing Capabilities & Conditions to Grow Intercultural Neighborhoods:

Toronto's Action for Neighbourhood Change Experience

Metropolis Conference
March 2011

The Goals of ANC

- Increase resident involvement in their neighbourhoods
- Build resident leadership
- Create opportunities for resident influence over local neighbourhood conditions
- Grounded in the belief that residents have the greatest vested interest in what happens in their neighbourhoods and therefore, must be at the centre of any neighbourhood renewal activities
- Guided by the principle of engaging inclusively, creating resident forums that represent the ethno-cultural diversity of their neighbourhoods

ANC's Beginnings

- Started as a two-year, federally-funded initiative in 2005, in 5 cities across Canada
- Goal was to revitalize some of the country's highest need communities, through resident engagement and mobilization
- In 2006, United Way Toronto launched its own ANC program, as a key component of its Neighbourhood Strategy
- The UWT initiative is targeted to 13 high-need priority neighbourhoods in Toronto's inner suburbs

Some Background about the Inner Suburban Neighbourhoods

- Largely built as middle-income commuter communities in the post-war years of the 1950s and 1960s
- Unique in North America for the high numbers of high-rise apartment towers along their arterial roads
- By 2006, the number of low-income families living in higher poverty neighbourhoods had soared to 46% - up from just 18% in 1981
- Biggest low-income growth in the city's post-war inner suburban communities

Some Background about the Inner Suburban Neighbourhoods (cont'd)

- Much of this poverty is concentrated within apartment towers in these neighbourhoods
- By 2006, 40% of families living in the high-rise towers were low income – up from 25% in 1981
- Today, they are settlement communities for newcomer and some of the most ethnically and culturally diverse neighbourhoods in the world

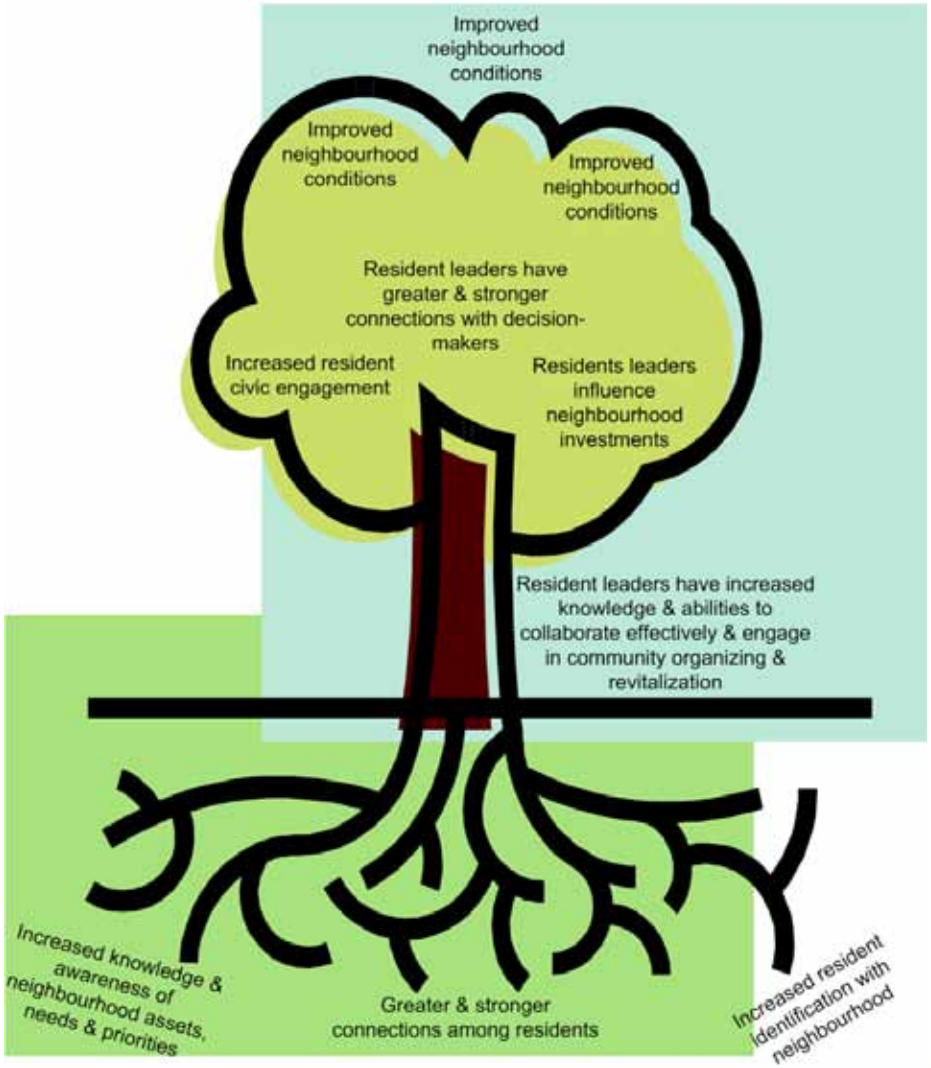
The Neighbourhood Challenge

- Poverty growing in inner suburbs in areas with a significant lack of social services
- Need to bend resources to these communities – charitable funders, the city, the province
- Need to give residents the opportunity to get involved and influence the neighbourhood rebuilding process

The Engagement Challenge

- More than 100 different languages spoken in some areas
- Isolation of certain groups; especially women within these groups
- Lack of identification with local neighbourhood
- Lack of meeting places
- Lack of knowledge about how to change local conditions

ANC Tree of Outcomes



Without you, there would be no way.

The First Step - Making Resident Connections

- Community information meetings
- Community festivals, barbecues, potlucks
- Jane’s Walks
- Multi-Cultural Group in Eglinton East
- Meet your Neighbours Night in Bathurst-Finch
- Quilt project in Dorset Park
- Tea Cafes in Lotherton

Making Connections that Endure & Make a Difference: the Dorset Park Story

- First connected women around a pressing issue that mattered to them – learning English
- Recruited a local volunteer to lead the group
- *The English Circle* was formed, of about 40 women who came from Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Egypt, South Africa, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Somalia and Ethiopia
- Participants made presentations about the cultures of their countries of origin, cuisines, and way of life, to practice their English
- Friendships formed and a desire to celebrate community followed, with potluck meals and community celebrations

Broadening their Sphere of Interest: The Dorset Park English Circle Story (cont'd)

- Partnered with the Canadian Red Cross – women concerned about their kids in schools; received "*Beyond the Hurt*" workshops on bullying
- Brought in speakers to learn about schools and parents relationship with schools
- The Walkway Advocacy Project – joined up with other community leaders to successfully advocate for improvement to unsafe, poorly maintained, and poorly lit walkway between their towers and the local school; brought in volunteer lawyer to understand rights; presented case to local councillor
- Participated in community clean ups
- Prepared a Resident Action Grant application and received funding for a more permanent ESL instructor and for child care
- English Circle helped establish, and now sends representatives to the larger Dorset Park Resident Association

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public health facilities — and usually just a short walk away. In places like Dorset Park the neighbourhoods are so spread out that the same services are much farther away. Enter the fundamental design flaw in these neighbourhoods that make them difficult for the people who live here: they were built on the assumption that people would all have cars and use them to get to the distant services as well as shopping and other activities. A pedestrian culture has been grafted onto an automobile landscape, and sometimes it's a hard fit.

We walk along the side of the school to a place where the walking residents of Dorset Park collide with the poor design. A narrow sidewalk, fenced in with chainlink on both sides, runs a few hundred metres between a condominium property and industrial land then turns left for a similar length. It's an important passageway between the school and park and the residential area to the south. For those on foot, it cuts traveling time down considerably, but with only two entrance-exits and poor lighting, it can be an unpleasant and almost claustrophobic place.

"This is the most important problem," explains Ali. "During the winter and summer months there is no maintenance. Along here this factory hasn't cut the grass for five years so we don't know what might be hiding in there. When we walk through it's one child at a time in a line because the fence is broken and it isn't safe for them." They point out that the bottom of the chainlink was done quickly and cheaply, likely decades ago, so now it's curving up and the sharp ends of the wire are ready to catch the pantleg or skirt of pedestrians. Mirza says her six-year-old son got caught on the fence and fell face-first into the concrete, causing a bloody nose. "In winter we all hold on to each other to get through," she continues. "They do plow it, but at 10pm at night. What about at 5am when everybody uses it?" Further down the pathway the fence bends in where the condo parking lot plough pushed the snow, further encroaching on the public space.

We continue through the neighbourhood as the towers give way to townhouses. A makeshift path leads through a fence and over some curbs and bits of worn lawn to the parking lot of the plaza at Ellesmere and Kennedy roads. It's another curious bit of confounding design: where a well-used pedestrian thoroughfare to this plaza feels like a teenager's illicit back route. It's an important plaza for the neighbourhood as it stocks the kinds of food residents want — Halal food, fresh bread — and has some services like the ANC office. Compare with the huge size of the half-empty parking lot, and the poor pedestrian planning is striking. In Dorset Park and so many areas of suburban Toronto like it, the population growth and demographic changes have outpaced the infrastructure.

→ Like much of Scarborough, just a little over 50 years ago Dorset Park was nearly all rich agricultural land. Scarborough Township, as it was known, was dotted with small villages — Wexford, Bendale, West Hill, Ellesmere — often with a post office and a few stores that serviced the adjacent concessions. Doreen Brown has been a resident since 1955, when Dorset Park was ready for the first wave of residents after its development. Of the transition from rural to suburban, Brown says, "Since

FENCES DON'T MAKE GOOD NEIGHBOURS
This long, narrow walkway is an important Dorset Park link between a school, a park, and numerous apartments. However, the passage is poorly maintained in the winter and the design raises several safety concerns, say local residents.

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The Impact: The Dorset Park English Circle Story (cont'd)

- Bridged relationships across cultures
- Created forum for identifying shared interests around parenting, employment, education, safety, and for sharing knowledge, skills, and supports
- In sharing cultural stories, became a platform for learning about Canada, its customs and systems
- Developed dynamic and cohesive citizenship, enabling participants to build confidence in speaking out for their rights
- Fulfilled a basic need for community but spawned into multiple initiatives, leading to women having strong voice in community

Creating Platforms for Local Residents to Lead: the Malvern Story

- Residents in Malvern organized themselves into 6 working groups:
  - Food & the environment
  - Civic engagement
  - Sports & recreation
  - Parents engagement & education
  - Community safety
  - Education
- Each committee developed a set of plans for change

Working collectively to Improve food access & the environment – the Malvern Story (cont'd)

- The Food & Environment Resident Work Group – a diverse group of upwards of 40 residents from South Asian, Caribbean, African backgrounds
- First inspired by vision of local resident to develop a community garden to teach children about the source and importance of food
- Negotiated with the owner of an apartment complex to allow them to convert a large unused waste area to a community garden
- Recruited volunteers from high school and local college to help with the clean up
- Obtained funding from LiveGreen for compost, pots, seeds
- Land transformed from a waste area to a flourishing community gathering place

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“ Our community garden shows people in Malvern that when we all reach out to support one another we can do something that will make us better off than yesterday”

Broadening the Vision – the Malvern Story (cont'd)

- Building on the success of the community garden, plans are now taking shape to create:
  - Children's' playground
  - Bicycle path
  - Walkway
  - Community barbecue area
  - Community orchard
  - Training on balcony planting

The Impact – the Community Garden Malvern Story (cont'd)

- Project is providing platform for intercultural connection and common purpose and gardening has become a common language
- Local leadership previously dominated by one ethno-cultural group – now broadening to others
- Building intergenerational connections & understanding
- Providing way for local leaders to share their expertise and transfer skills to others
- Taking community engagement to a higher level – people beginning to think about the bigger picture and how they can influence change in a bigger way

ANC Today

- Active in all 13 priority neighbourhoods
- Has launched the formation of numerous resident groups across the neighbourhoods
- Each neighbourhood developing annual Resident Action Plans
- Residents planning to form a “super, cross-city” resident group to advocate for change on common issues
- United Way Toronto & its partner agencies currently reflecting on the first 5 years of ANC and how the resident work can be effectively supported going forward

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Thank You