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Learning Through Evaluation? Reflections on Two Federal Community-Building Initiatives

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LEARNING THROUGH EVALUATION? REFLECTIONS ON TWO FEDERAL COMMUNITY-BUILDING INITIATIVES

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Abstract: In recent years, the federal government has launched numerous pilot projects to tackle complex, localized policy problems through new modes of governance involving vertical engagement with community-based organizations and horizontal collaboration across departments. A key purpose of these time-limited projects is policy learning, with an emphasis on action research and stakeholder dialogue to inform future innovation. However, realizing the possibilities for learning through pilot projects requires evaluation frameworks sensitive to the particular challenges of collaborative and community-based policy making. Through comparative case study analysis of two recent federal pilot projects, we highlight tensions in prevailing approaches and explore strategies for better alignment of federal evaluation frameworks with the needs and capacities of local communities.

Résumé : Ces dernières années, le gouvernement fédéral a lancé de nombreux projets pilotes pour s'attaquer à des problèmes de politiques locaux complexes avec de nouvelles méthodes de gouvernance requérant l'engagement vertical des organisations communautaires et la collaboration horizontale entre les ministères. L'un des principaux objectifs de ces projets d'une durée limitée est l'apprentissage en matière de politiques, en mettant l'accent sur la recherche-action et sur le dialogue avec les intervenants pour orienter les innovations futures. Cela dit, la concrétisation des possibilités d'apprentissage au moyen de projets pilotes exige des cadres d'évaluation sensibles aux défis particuliers de l'élaboration collaborative et communautaire des politiques. Par l'analyse comparative d'études de cas portant sur deux projets pilotes fédéraux récents, nous faisons la lumière sur les tensions dans

les approches les plus répandues et études des stratégies en vue d'harmoniser des cadres fédéraux d'évaluation qui tiennent compte des besoins et des capacités des communautés locales.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade or so, the federal government has sought to renew and rebuild its social policy capacity. Following an extended period of restraint, characterized by unilateral retreats on cost-shared programs with the provinces and limited use of its own spending power, Ottawa began in the late 1990s to reinvest part of its growing budgetary surpluses. The bulk of this money flowed through the traditional inter-governmental channels for programming in income security, health care, and post-secondary education. However, these expenditures on the pillars of the postwar welfare regime were supplemented by a host of quite novel interventions where Ottawa works directly and collaboratively at the local level with representative organizations and community networks (Boismenu & Graefe, 2004). These initiatives crossed a range of fields including homelessness, the social economy, urban Aboriginal issues, and neighbourhood revitalization (Bradford, 2005). The Martin Liberals packaged the interventions as part of an ambitious “New Deal for Communities” while the Harper Conservatives, with much less fanfare, have renewed funding for several of these strategic investments.

This article analyzes such federal-local collaborations as vehicles for organizational learning about new modes of governance suited to policy conditions of complexity and uncertainty. The initiatives have been conceived as pilot projects to test innovative design and delivery features, and they all emphasize the importance of evaluation as an opportunity for governments and communities to learn together about “what works where and why.” Yet, whether these opportunities are actually pursued depends on the evaluation process itself—the frameworks and methodologies adopted and the ensuing nature of government-community interaction (Levitan-Reid & Torjman, 2006). Does the community involvement that is central to the ethos and objectives of the pilot projects extend to the evaluation process? Do the evaluation frameworks recognize the complexity of community change and value local knowledge about program impacts? To explore such questions, we focus on two prominent recent federal pilot projects—the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) and the Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC).

The analysis is organized in three parts. We begin by putting the UAS and ANC in the broader context of growing policy interest in place-based and community-driven strategies and associated debates about new governance models. Next we review current evaluation approaches in the federal government, identifying three key tensions that inform assessments of the kind of comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) represented by our two pilots. The rest of the article tracks these tensions through the UAS and ANC initiatives, drawing conclusions about the nature of the learning processes and offering ideas about how federal evaluation frameworks might better support community-based, collaborative policy making.

PART 1: COMMUNITIES BACK ON THE FEDERAL AGENDA?

Accounting for the “local turn” in federal social policy requires looking beyond Ottawa’s evident political desire to reassert federal visibility and legitimacy in the wake of the national unity crisis triggered by the 1995 Quebec referendum. In fact, the new programming engages a growing body of policy research mapping new “social risks” that have accompanied the major economic and social transformations of the past 30 years (Jenson, 2004). There is no shortage of studies documenting how the intensified cost competition and unprecedented technological innovations stemming from globalization are restructuring national economies and labour markets all across the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (McBride & Shields, 1997). In Canada, a precipitous decline in manufacturing employment and the rapid growth of service sectors dominated by low-paid, part-time, and insecure work have widened income inequality and generated stubbornly high national poverty rates (Yalnizyan, 2007). Moreover, these structural transformations were occurring just as government cutbacks and downloading exposed serious gaps in the network of social services and development supports. Not surprisingly, their combined impact has hit certain categories of the population and specific geographic places particularly hard (Heisz & McLeod, 2004; Lee, 2000). Recent immigrants, visible minorities, Aboriginal peoples, and lone-parent families now encounter multifaceted barriers to opportunity and increasingly find themselves living in the same distressed neighbourhoods in large Canadian cities. The result has been a troubling mix of socio-spatial exclusion known as “poverty by postal code” (United Way of Greater Toronto and Canadian Council on Social Development [CCSD], 2004).

Confronted with such complex challenges, policy makers are turning to place-based and community-driven strategies (Bradford, 2005). A multidisciplinary body of research highlights connections between individual or family outcomes and the quality of the surrounding environment (Sampson, 1999). Studies of child and youth development, for example, show how contextual factors that vary by locale—such as educational resources, recreational services, crime rates, and so forth—intersect with individual attributes to enhance or limit life chances (Hertzman, 2000). These findings are echoed in the voluminous literature on social capital that points out the importance of associational ties, social networks, and civic participation to individual progress and vibrant communities (Putnam, 1995; Voyer & Franke, 2006). While an understanding of precisely how such “neighbourhood effects” operate remains incomplete, governments are adding community-building concepts to the social policy repertoire (Beauvais & Jenson, 2003; Divay & Seguin, 2003). The aim is to support local organizational capacity to plan and lead change, both by reaching out to marginalized residents and by mobilizing *in situ* governance networks that possess the “contextual intelligence” and local legitimacy to take purposeful action (Corburn, 2005). In their comprehensive survey of Canadian social policy dynamics, James Rice and Michael Prince conclude that the federal government must now “encourage people to come together to identify common problems, develop local solutions, allocate resources to address problems, and open the process so it includes a diverse group of participants in the community-development process” (Rice & Prince, 2000, p. 206).

However, the demands of the place-based and community-driven approach are not yet well aligned with established policy relations between government and the community sector. Tensions have been especially evident in terms of funding instruments and accountability frameworks (Scott, 2003). Leading public administration scholars describe a looming conflict between two governance models, one an embedded “command-and-control” structure that resists collaboration and engagement, and the other an emergent model that seeks change through “negotiation and persuasion” (Peach, 2004; Phillips, 2004; Salamon, 2005).

In the Canadian federal government, the command-and-control model is dominant (Phillips, 2006). Top-down relationships emphasize strict compliance with departmentally defined objectives that are prescribed in advance and detailed in contracts specifying how funds are to be spent, the timelines for achieving results, and the protocols for re-

porting. The model's preoccupation with financial monitoring—and associated risk-adverse, rules-based management culture—resonates with the institutional logic of Westminster-style responsible government (Bakvis & Juillet, 2004; Peach, 2004). Vertical lines of authority and accountability upward may drive discretion or creativity out of the policy process, but they serve the system's overarching goal of limiting the exposure of Ministers in Parliament to problems—real or alleged—as programs roll out. Moreover, the structural orientations of responsible government have been reinforced by the teachings of the New Public Management (NPM) (Aucoin, 1995). Its principal-agent model of government-community interaction concentrates authority at the upper echelons of the bureaucracy for system-wide control over the content, cost, and operation of programs.

In the Canadian context, the “sponsorship scandal” and “HRDC boondoggle” have only amplified the NPM message of strict financial accountability through highly prescriptive contracting for narrow purposes (Good, 2003). Our next section takes stock of current federal evaluation practices and identifies salient tensions as dominant frameworks and methodologies are applied to CCIs.

PART 2: POLICY EVALUATION IN CANADA: TRENDS AND TENSIONS

The NPM's emphasis on accountability and control has led to the widespread use of performance measurement standards (McDavid & Hawthorn, 2006) and to changes in the role and function of evaluation within government. In 2009, the Canadian government revised the Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) policy on evaluation, reinforcing the message that evaluation is to be used as a management accountability and decision-making tool. This new policy clearly articulates a vision of evaluation as an evidence-based, neutral and objective mechanism designed to provide outcome- and results-based information on program performance and spending. The new policy now requires the evaluation of all government programs every five years, including direct connections between evaluation design and the level of risk associated with each program. Performance measurement remains clearly aligned with federal evaluation policy. Program evaluation thus continues to be viewed as both an important component of NPM (TBS, 2004) and a complementary management technique useful for enhancing the government's performance measurement strategies (McDavid & Hawthorn, 2006; Scheirer & Newcomer, 2001).

Evaluation and performance measurement are each considered strategic components of the NPM. However, the prominent role of performance measurement within the government's Management Accountability Framework (MAF) and the concomitant emphasis on results have led to a more circumscribed role for evaluation (and evaluative thinking) within public policy reform (Mayne & Rist, 2006; McDavid & Huse, 2006). Public sector downsizing has also resulted in fewer resources dedicated to evaluation and an increased reliance on performance measurement (McDavid, 2006). Despite the potential complementarity of evaluation and performance measurement (McDavid & Hawthorn, 2006; Scheirer & Newcomer, 2001), the conflation of the two as methodological tools of NPM overlooks some rather fundamental differences, resulting in the loss of evaluation as an instrument for strategic learning and capacity building. The strength of performance measurement is in providing managers with "important short-term, quick turn-around information for tracking progress against stated goals" (Blalock, 1999, p. 142). Evaluation, in contrast, can be an educative instrument for enhanced understanding, capacity building, and dialogue (House & Howe, 2000). In an important sense, performance measurement is about control for accountability where evaluation is about learning for development (Davies, Newcomer, & Soydan, 2006). The two sets of values and goals are not easily reconciled.

The predominance of performance measurement in government as a key accountability component of NPM provides the current foundation and climate for the reception and use of evaluation within government. We thus argue that while CCIs are challenging in their own right, the demands of the new public management further exacerbate the difficulties. To illustrate, we focus on three enduring and overlapping tensions that structure the interaction between national governments and local communities in evaluation.

Local and national. CCIs are community-driven initiatives that value local knowledge and sustained community participation (Kubisch, Fullbright-Anderson, & Connell, 1998). They are largely bottom-up processes designed to build neighbourhood, family, and individual change through local development and capacity building. The federal priority, on the other hand, is largely driven by performance measurement and accountability (Allan & Black, 2006), an agenda that can often conflict with the local, community-based capacity-building characteristics of CCIs. Despite the fact that the CCI literature clearly articulates the need to create partnerships among stakehold-

ers and the need to include local knowledge and input in the national evaluation (Allen & Black, 2006), the involvement of local community stakeholders continues to be a challenge for national governments (Fredericks, Carman, & Birkland, 2001; Guzman & Feria, 2002; Hughes & Traynor, 2000).

Process and results. One of the more enduring challenges in evaluating CCIs is the tension between the need to develop local-level capacity, empowerment, and linkages among people, while attending to the more technical demands for results and outcomes at the national level (Kubisch, 2005). CCIs are long-term projects that can take many years to reach their full potential, often leading to the adoption of process measures as ends in themselves (Hughes & Traynor, 2000). The issue is not merely the anticipated timeframe for change, but the demand for concrete results and evidence of effective program performance within the horizon of government funding mandates. The need to demonstrate early results may skew evaluations from learning and community-building processes to more conventional results-oriented measurement. Program accomplishments of particular significance to the community but difficult to quantify may be glossed over (Auspos & Kubisch, 2004).

Complexity and accountability. The tension between process and results is also a function of the inherent complexity of the problems that gave rise to the CCI in the first instance. With CCIs, multiple stakeholders from the community and from government join together to work on a range of interconnected issues at the individual, family, and neighbourhood levels. Given the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of CCIs, the focus on results and accountability to measure program value will not be sufficient (Greene, 1999). The prior delineation of outcomes for accountability purposes reduces what can be known about a program as it evolves, and circumvents learning opportunities among participants. Creative dialogue among potentially competing and conflicting voices may not be seen as a necessary starting point for producing the kind of measurable change and tangible results recognized in traditional accountability protocols.

In sum, these three tensions impede the potential of evaluation to provide more than assessments on performance or outcomes (Cousins, Goh, Elliott, & Aubry, in press). As major components of the federal government's results-based agenda, current modes of evaluation and performance measurement serve primarily as management tools for decision-making and accountability purposes. They fall short of

capturing the full range of policy issues, local perspectives, and learning processes at play when governments seek to enable bottom-up community development.

Yet, close observers of federal policy machinery now point to “seeds of change” (CCSD, 2006, p. 46) and “creative pockets of experimentation with various forms of shared governance” (Phillips, 2006, p. 23). It is in this context that the various pilot CCIs launched by the federal government over the past decade acquire their significance (Task Force on Community Investments, 2006). As the government put it when renewing the Urban Aboriginal Strategy, the goal was to “respond to local priorities” and make “significant progress along the road to horizontal management as well as shared accountability” (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2008). However, making such progress may well depend on finding new ways to manage the three key tensions we have identified between government demands and community aspirations. Indeed, the two case studies that follow demonstrate the federal government’s intent to support community-driven change and innovative governance arrangements. But they also underscore the need for a broader conception of evaluation to bridge the philosophical and methodological distance between the demands of NPM accountability and the needs of community-based program stakeholders.

PART 3: LEARNING THROUGH EVALUATION? THE UAS AND ANC

The Urban Aboriginal Strategy: Top-Down or Bottom-Up?

The Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) is a Government of Canada initiative developed as part of *Gathering Strength: Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1997), the government’s response to the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1996). Implemented in 1998, the UAS is designed to foster collaboration and improve coordination and horizontal linkages among federal government departments and agencies and develop partnerships with other relevant stakeholders to address the socio-economic needs of Aboriginal people living in urban settings. Twelve communities across Canada, up from eight during the initial phase of the program, have been selected as pilot project sites in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. The Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians (OFI), a division of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, is the current UAS lead, with eight other departments and

agencies involved to varying degrees (Human Resources and Social Development Canada/Service Canada, Western Economic Diversification Canada, Canadian Heritage, Health Canada, Public Health Agency Canada, Industry Canada, Justice Canada, and Public Safety Canada).

The intent of the pilot phase is to provide urban Aboriginal communities with the flexibility to tailor their programs to local needs and to experiment with innovative ways of engaging stakeholders in addressing community-based priorities. The broad objectives of this phase are to build organizational capacity within urban Aboriginal organizations at the local level; develop partnerships with provincial and municipal governments, urban Aboriginal organizations, and communities; and coordinate federal government resources across departments and agencies. All of the 12 communities have created steering committees composed of broad stakeholder representation to identify specific community priorities and to oversee program and pilot project implementation.

In 2005 the OFI commissioned a formative evaluation of the eight original pilot projects in order to assess early progress, identify program improvements and garner agreement on the UAS Results-Based Management and Accountability Framework (RMAF) for a future summative evaluation. As a relatively new initiative and with little knowledge about how communities had implemented the pilot phase, the evaluation was considered exploratory with a specific focus on implementation issues. To guide the formative evaluation, the OFI established seven areas of inquiry (Aboriginal involvement; collaborative and partnership building; coordination with other initiatives; potential for a single-window approach to funding, resourcing, and capacity building; service enhancements; overall assessment of UAS model; and data collection for a future summative evaluation), all of which were elaborated upon through extensive data collection and analysis. While evaluation methods included interviews and group interviews with multiple and diverse stakeholders (including project authorities), as well as an e-mail survey of Aboriginal organizations, the core work of the evaluation was a collection of case studies of the eight original pilot sites (with an average of 16 interviews per site).

Initial evaluation findings suggest that despite modest success to date, particularly in terms of program adaptability and flexibility to local community needs, there remain significant challenges with respect to program expectations as reflected in the RMAF and in the

conflict between the government funding model and the nature of incremental change at the community level. The overall assessment of the pilot phase highlights the myriad challenges facing the evaluation of horizontal initiatives such as the UAS, as tensions mount between national program strategies and local realities. The tensions already evident in managing horizontal initiatives were found to be further intensified by the history of exploitation and colonialization between Aboriginal communities and the dominant culture, a history that requires a specific focus on building authentic and trusting partnerships and a constant reaffirmation of the relationships (Letiecq & Bailey, 2004).

Given these challenges, was the specific methodology adopted for the formative evaluation aligned with the needs of a community-based initiative? Was the evaluation consistent with the type of learning-based and innovative pilot program design of the UAS? Was consideration given to the history between Aboriginal communities and government and to the bottom-up approach advanced in the UAS pilot phase? To explore these questions, we will look to the formative evaluation of the UAS conducted at the national level (Alderson-Gill & Associates Consulting Inc., 2005) and to the process evaluation of the Saskatoon UAS (Spence & Findlay, 2007). Although both evaluations are formative and process-based, rather than summative and more judgement oriented, they nonetheless provide a comprehensive picture of the evaluation of the UAS during its pilot phase. While the evaluations of the UAS were specifically designed to identify process issues and areas of improvement (rather than outcomes), they nonetheless highlight the tensions we described between the local and the national, between community-level needs and expectations and federal requirements.

The UAS pilot phase was designed to provide urban Aboriginal people with the opportunity to try innovative and community-based approaches to ameliorate inequities, with each participating community selecting their own governance model and identifying strategic goals and program focus. The fact that the UAS was intended for Aboriginal people living in urban centres was itself quite innovative, as the vast majority of such programs are generally targeted at the on-reserve population. Thus, given the uniqueness of the UAS and the experimental nature of the pilot programs, we might have expected to see a less traditional (or top-down) approach to evaluation. Given the highly collaborative nature of horizontal initiatives, we might also have anticipated a more community-based and collaborative approach

to evaluation. A more collaborative approach to evaluation has the potential to facilitate shared understanding among all stakeholders (Patton, 1997), strengthen partnerships (Weiss, 1995), and enhance mutual and organizational learning (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Torres & Preskill, 2001), all of which are key UAS outcomes. A broader view of evaluation is thus “more like a pedagogy in which the evaluator helps practitioners understand the kinds of evaluative decisions they face and enhance their ability to deliberate well” (Schwandt, 2005, p. 99), leading to what Patton (1997) has termed the process use of evaluation, where the process of engaging in the evaluation has an impact quite beyond the evaluation findings themselves (in terms of learning research and evaluation skills). This perspective of evaluation as a means of promoting collective and organizational learning has a rich literature (see Cousins & Earl, 1992, 1995; Patton, 1997; Torres & Preskill, 2001) that affirms the importance of a bottom-up process to enhance community-based problem solving and program implementation. The failure to adopt a more collaborative methodology for the UAS evaluation, particularly during the formative phase, ultimately resulted in a missed opportunity for dialogue among diverse program stakeholders.

Despite the use of qualitative methods and the inclusion of stakeholder input, both evaluations of the UAS were conducted by external consultants who were hired to carry out an arms-length or “impartial” evaluation that did not take advantage of the collaborative potential of the community-based UAS program pilot process. The top-down approach to evaluation, as evidenced both nationally and provincially, conflicted with the community-based ethos of the UAS pilots and with the need for more collaborative evaluations in Aboriginal communities (Chouinard & Cousins, 2007). The drive to satisfy the information needs of national stakeholders, despite the formative nature of the evaluation and the lack of specific outcome measures, limited the learning and capacity-building function that might have occurred through greater participation. A theory of change approach, considered a powerful tool in the evaluation of CCIs, particularly in terms of its potential to clarify program process and outcome goals, generate common understanding, promote dialogue among stakeholders, and influence policy development (Kubisch et al., 1998; Weiss, 1995), was not included in either evaluation. In the end, the use of a more participatory approach could have helped mitigate some of the salient issues identified in the pilot programs and helped further learning within the pilot initiatives.

Program evaluation has the potential to provide a valuable learning experience beyond the specific findings it may generate by enhancing mutual understanding through stakeholder involvement and collaboration (Patton, 1997). While this view of evaluation is in contrast to the top-down, objective-based approach adopted for the UAS, it is worth noting that other UAS pilot sites offer the promise of more innovative approaches to evaluation. The Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative, for example, has produced an Aboriginal research methodology (entitled *Learning Through Knowledge*) for data collection and analysis that is very much community-based and in keeping with Aboriginal values and traditions. Formative evaluation has also been built in to their annual reporting cycle as a way to assess progress and support community engagement. As the UAS pilot projects unfold in each community, we might see further evidence of a community-up approach that is consistent with the aims of the UAS.

The ANC: Working Through the Federal-Community Tensions?

In 2005, the federal government launched a two-year action research project to develop integrated approaches to revitalizing distressed neighbourhoods in five cities—Halifax, Toronto, Thunder Bay, Regina, and Surrey. The goal was to contribute new knowledge about neighbourhood revitalization through building local capacities, and to discover how such insights could inform government policies and programs. The approach was grounded in a commitment to resident-led change. Five federal agencies (the National Secretariat on Homelessness, the Office of Learning Technologies, and the National Literacy Initiative [HRSDC]; Canada's Drug Strategy [Health Canada]; and the National Crime Prevention Strategy [Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada]) and three national partners (the United Way of Canada and local affiliates, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, and the Tamarack Institute of Social Engagement) came together in an innovative horizontal and vertical policy collaboration. The project was carried out in two phases, with the first running from February 2005 to March 2006 and the second from June 2006 to June 2007.

The ANC's National Project Office at the United Way of Canada developed a RMAF that included a logic model setting out the key objectives and the various activities and outputs that would deliver outcomes. For the government funders, the RMAF supplied the road map that would guide monitoring and reporting on the project and enable assessment of whether the anticipated results were actually achieved.

Notably, the RMAF's logic model acknowledged processes such as relationship building and neighbourhood capacity as legitimate outcomes (Torjman, 2006). Still, the ANC's resident-led, holistic policy approach posed new challenges: engaging residents as "co-learners and co-producers" rather than passive recipients of predetermined services meant that outcomes could not be reliably specified in advance; bringing together separate departments for horizontal policy meant that linking outcomes to individual departmental mandates would be difficult; and the principle of resident-led change suggested that accountability to residents and their neighbourhoods should take precedence over government.

How did the ANC manage these challenges? What was the impact of the accountability framework in enabling or hindering effective navigation through the "unfamiliar terrain" and cross-pressures? On these questions, the ANC's summative evaluation and numerous project updates and reports offer valuable insights (Jamieson & Kinnon, 2007). The overall judgement is clear: the ANC was a notable success—specifically in demonstrating the potential of resident-led neighbourhood revitalization, in generating a remarkable body of knowledge and tools to support local change, and, equally important, in revealing significant gaps in existing governance structures for collaborative policy.

On this last point, it is apparent that the role of the federal government proved problematic, especially as the ANC's work evolved over the two years. Here, the three tensions we have identified in government support for, and evaluation of, CCIs came to the fore. Yet the ANC experience offers two storylines: first a familiar one that describes these tensions and how they constrained local innovation; and a second, quite different, narrative about creative adaptation by the project partners to maintain momentum. Indeed, the ANC's key legacy is a neighbourhood revitalization strategy rooted in a learning-based approach to making, measuring, and evaluating progress.

It is important to acknowledge that the project got off to a good start when the five government agencies came to agreement on two contribution agreements rather than five, and on a single reporting and evaluation framework. Establishing this streamlined administration was termed the "miracle" of ANC (Gorman, 2006; Torjman, 2006). In addition, ANC partners praised the "exemplary" efforts of individual civil servants involved in the project (Leviton-Reid, 2006,

p. 17). However, it was emphasized that these officials worked within a wider public sector environment ill-suited to the collaborative and long-term nature of neighbourhood revitalization. The tensions and disconnects emerged as the project moved into implementation. Funding, reporting, and just what constituted evidence of progress all proved difficult.

With funding, it was apparent that the government's annual budgeting cycle was a poor match with the multifaceted and incremental nature of neighbourhood change. Each of the five sites revealed the importance of time-consuming start-up activities in engaging and mobilizing residents in new governance processes that would oversee specific revitalization projects. This start-up work, extending to 18 months in some cases, involved the relationship- and capacity-building work that the ANC's logic model recognized as the necessary basis for longer-term improvements in immediate departmental priorities of crime reduction, employment, homelessness, and so forth. However, government funders remained more focused on such quantifiable measures of individual well-being. The "abstract" nature of the ANC's early outputs and their focus on "upstream prevention" of problems through various kinds of community-building supports proved challenging for project champions inside government to defend (Levitan-Reid, 2006). Further, the ANC mismatch between short-term funding and longer-term project work was compounded by an unanticipated two-month delay in releasing funds for the project's second phase. This hiatus was caused by factors well beyond the ANC's control—principally the change of government in January 2006—but it diverted project resources to making a case for another year of funding just as momentum was building in the five neighbourhood sites. At the same time, the ANC partners, both national and local, found themselves burdened by excessive reporting requirements. Formal monthly written reports on discreet activities and results were seen to deflect focus from the substantive work of the project and run contrary to its learning ethos (Jamieson & Kinnon, 2007, p. 46).

These tensions expressed the significant challenges the government faced in combining the roles of both ANC financial sponsor and learning partner (Gorman, 2007). A financial sponsor requires distance for the purposes of accountability, while a learning partner needs relationships for meeting shared goals. In the ANC, a process of policy dialogue joining government funders, community partners, and neighbourhood sites was proposed to build mutual understanding of different roles. A series of 13 dialogues were to be convened by

the key ANC policy partner, the Caledon Institute. The expectation was that such interaction could strengthen the federal government's ability to understand the value of "process outcomes" and better align its funding and reporting with community rhythms (Torjman, 2005). However, after only three sessions the process was discontinued. Government priorities shifted, and the dedicated resources required for sustained engagement in the dialogues never materialized. Departmental officials close to the project and supportive of its goals regretted that "[e]veryone 'pulled back into their silos'" (Jamieson & Kinnon, 2007, p. E-2).

Despite these tensions, or perhaps because of them, the ANC partners moved forward in the second year to produce an impressive body of practical knowledge to inform future policy and programming. Staying true to its learning principles, the ANC made appropriate tactical adjustments in the face of constraints, while also exploring a new Canadian framework for advancing neighbourhood revitalization.

In terms of adjustments, the monthly reporting associated with the RMAF was switched to a quarterly system that relied more on resident reflection of what outcomes were most critical to track. Reports continued to detail project activities and results, but the emphasis shifted more to qualitative and experiential data. One format used was the narrative report, published as ANC *Community Stories* based on insights from residents and project staff in each neighbourhood site (Makhoul, 2007a). Accessible to a wide audience and published at the beginning, mid-point, and end of each site project, they offered important contextual insights into change processes and local interpretations of the ANC's impact.

Another example of such adjustment came through Project Pool action grants. These grants helped respond to concerns that such collaborative projects were better at mapping the complexity of neighbourhood revitalization than providing results and feedback in a format useful for governments. Modest funding allocated to each of the sites served a dual purpose. On the one hand, they enabled delivery of a diverse range of concrete initiatives including for youth engagement, neighbourhood clean-up, and community service hubs. A sense of immediate impact and momentum was gained locally alongside evidence of tangible activity for national funders. On the other hand, with design and management of these projects in the neighbourhood, residents applied newly acquired skills in grant writing, community organization, partnership formation, and evaluation frameworks.

However, the action grants did not resolve the larger issues surrounding government support for projects that seem either unrelated to departmental mandates or not directly impacting individual or neighbourhood well-being on the overall outcomes such as employment, crime, or housing. As one civil servant put it, “It is hard for politicians to connect collecting garbage on Saturday to crime prevention and defend it in the House of Commons” (Jamieson & Kinnon, 2007, p. E-6).

On this challenge, the ANC looked to break new ground. As the government disengaged from the policy dialogues, the ANC partners turned to supplementing the existing RMAF framework with a developmental evaluation approach based on a “neighbourhood theory of change” (Gorman, 2006). Designed to capture the iterative nature of revitalization work and to guide investment decisions, the theory of change was built around five key assumptions: first, the well-being of residents and neighbourhoods depends on local control over social, cultural, physical, environmental, and economic assets; second, this control requires collaborative neighbourhood governance joining residents with “system-wide supports”; third, for such governance relations to flourish in distressed neighbourhoods, “transformational change” is necessary through “financial investment, technical assistance, research data, and policy changes”; fourth, there is no single neighbourhood change starting point—rather it will vary by context; fifth, the change process must allow for course corrections over time as new learning from participants enriches understanding of complexity. In guiding ANC projects, the theory emphasized interventions to support neighbourhood governance networks capable of building up community assets in four “outcome domains”: inclusion and engagement; housing; health and safety; and the economy (Gorman, 2006, p. 16).

The theory was field-tested across the different ANC sites as the action grants rolled out (Makhoul, 2007b). The Toronto experience illustrates the dynamic. Working in a Scarborough neighbourhood where more than half the population was born outside Canada and 26 languages were spoken, the ANC hired nine community animators, training them in neighbourhood revitalization and directing them to engage with their communities on priorities. Identifying the neighbourhood’s key challenge as a failure to engage with and leverage its own ethno-cultural diversity, the community animators created network-based projects for language training, youth, and immigrant women. These networks came together through a new

community hub to integrate services and governance resources. According to participants, the ANC community animators delivered across several theory-of-change priorities related to inclusion and engagement outcomes. These included training a cohort of community builders, providing civic engagement for marginalized residents, and strengthening neighbourhood capacity to develop its socio-cultural assets (Makhoul, 2007b). Further, the process included adjustments along the way to help ensure the project's sustainability as the ANC pilot wound down.

Alongside the theory of change, the ANC developed a **Neighbourhood Vitality Index** that blended quantitative and qualitative data in neighbourhood profiles to establish priorities and set baselines for monitoring the impact of interventions (Meagher, n.d.). These tools could aid government departments in connecting their individual mandates to the common goal of neighbourhood revitalization. The ANC was contributing “a crisper evidence base for neighbourhood revitalization” that could be “linked to investment decisions” (Gorman, 2007). To further advance these tools and processes, the ANC convened peer-to-peer “reflection sessions” on key lessons. In the public servant sessions there was pointed advice for senior government decision makers. Notable was the call for civil service training and mentorship in community change policy, and proposals for horizontal policy making through dedicated project secretariats to ensure continuity and engage both senior managers and regional officers. Three basic messages came through: the prospects for vertical collaboration were greatly enhanced by horizontal partnerships among government departments; such partnerships remained quite weak at the federal level; and, perhaps most important, the practical lessons from the ANC should be disseminated widely across government with support from central agencies such as the Privy Council Office and Treasury Board.

PART 4: DISCUSSION: TOWARD MORE COMMUNITY-DRIVEN EVALUATION?

The Canadian federal government is seeking new policy knowledge to move toward greater collaboration with communities, involving both new vertical and new horizontal policy relationships. Our article has focused on vertical relations, exploring one federal strategy—the use of experimental pilot projects designed to generate bottom-up, practical knowledge about effective modes of collaboration. Given the emphasis on learning, our analysis focused on the way in which

the accountability and evaluation frameworks have either enabled or hindered better relationships and mutual understanding among partners. The holistic and community-driven approaches of both the UAS and the ANC signal a growing recognition that traditional administrative structures and policies based on top-down, command-and-control approaches are ill-suited to complex urban social problems. As our case studies show, engineering such shifts in governance structures and policy processes is not easy. Deeply entrenched forms of accountability and performance measurement continue to reinforce hierarchical relations and departmental silos. Evaluation becomes more a barrier to, rather than a vehicle for, policy and organizational learning.

These barriers are rooted in the federal Treasury Board's conception of evaluation. Its revised policy makes clear that evaluation activity is intended to serve an *instrumental* function as a management tool for decision making and accountability purposes (Treasury Board Secretariat, 2009). Considered a "technical undertaking," evaluation is understood as a set of tools that, if used correctly, has the potential to generate answers and improve practice (Schwandt, 2003). Overlooked in the drive towards performance standards is that evaluation can also serve a *conceptual* function, as a vehicle for generating dialogue among stakeholders and facilitating learning. From this perspective, evaluation can be considered a 'pedagogical undertaking', seeking to understand the construction and interpretation of results as well as decision making in particular socio-cultural and historical contexts (Schwandt, 2003).

The distinction between the instrumental and conceptual uses of evaluation highlights the contradiction between the experimental and innovative nature of the UAS and ANC policy initiatives and the current practice of evaluation at the federal level. Specifically, evaluation as an instrumental practice is focused on techniques, methods, and control, none of which is consistent with the exploratory and participatory nature of the UAS and ANC initiatives. By contrast, evaluation as a conceptual practice focuses on deliberation, dialogue, and learning, all of which are more aligned with the horizontal and vertical collaboration animating the two initiatives. A better fit is thus needed between evaluation methodologies and policy experiments if they are to deliver the lessons and insights sought by government and communities alike. As Sanderson (2002) points out, "if evaluation is to fulfil its potential for driving policy learning, it must be fully integrated into the ongoing discourse" (p. 19), beginning at the

initial stage of policy development and moving through design and implementation.

Our two case studies demonstrate the potential of learning-based policy pilots to inform and guide federal community policy initiatives. But they also underscore the need for evaluation frameworks that are philosophically consistent with a community development approach and sensitive to the incremental and longer-term nature of comprehensive community regeneration processes. Our case studies bring into focus four specific concerns in shaping new evaluation frameworks for pilot projects better aligned with community needs, capacities, and aspirations.

First, evaluation methodologies need to respect the learning ethos of the pilot initiatives and to recognize increased local actor engagement as a powerful learning opportunity at the program, individual and community levels (Cousins & Earl, 1995; Preskill & Torres, 1999). Resources must be allocated for convening the dialogue necessary for resident involvement in interpreting and assessing change. Second, strategies are needed to reconcile the government call for tangible, measurable results with the reality of incremental, bottom-up change associated with complex community initiatives. This tension is particularly evident in the kind of short-term pilot projects we have examined (Sanderson, 2000). Without the time to experience policy effects or concrete impacts of interventions, it becomes exceedingly difficult for governments to measure change or demonstrate progress. Yet, the less tangible, process-oriented outcomes seeded by such pilots can build the community's capacity for change and establish a social context for long-term success.

A further concern arises from the reliance on third-party evaluators to ensure more "impartiality in behaviour and process" leading to what are considered more "valid and objective" findings. While a more traditional evaluator role, such as objective outsider and "seeker of fact" (Weiss, 1998, p. 98), may be required in certain instances, it often compromises the goal of an engaged and participatory process. Given the importance of learning and capacity building within the pilot initiatives, there is a need for evaluators to be more directly involved as partners, collaborators, coaches, and educators (Patton, 1997; Torres & Preskill, 2001). As Preskill and Torres (1999) argue:

Whether internal or external to the organization, the evaluator's role becomes that of facilitating dialogue and

reflection through question-asking and identifying and clarifying organization members' values, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge as they engage in each phase of the inquiry. (p. 56)

Finally, there is a need for evaluation methodologies that are sensitive to variations in pilot project or local program contexts, and responsive to the particular, historically evolved concerns of communities. Both the UAS and ANC aimed for such resident-led, local embedding. Yet such aspirations must be supported by evaluation approaches with strong communication structures, breaking down both departmental and cultural silos to bring stakeholders together in an authentic and ongoing conversation about progress and results. As Sanderson (2000) explains, "in order to provide the capacity for learning in complex policy systems, evaluation must become a more 'exploratory' and 'explanatory' enterprise" (p. 445).

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of two federal community-driven pilot initiatives highlights the need for innovative evaluation frameworks that feature more participatory, bottom-up methodologies validating different kinds of knowledge and engaging key stakeholders in all facets of monitoring, reporting, and assessment. Such policy collaborations have the potential to solve some of today's most urgent and complex social problems. But they also raise significant governance challenges. Our analysis suggests that these become more tractable when framed by evaluation approaches that allow for continuous feedback and course correction in pursuit of shared outcomes. Evaluation, in this view, is a conceptual tool for learning about how to build capacity both in communities and across government agencies on issues of program planning, implementation, and assessment. Learning-based evaluation contributes to community building by offering a pathway to connect local practices with better public policy (Weiss, 1998). As the UAS demonstrated, such pathways must acknowledge and respect differences across communities, and build upon a community's particular cultural heritage and strengths. As the ANC demonstrated, such pathways can also benefit from theories of change that connect process activities, community outcomes, and departmental mandates to clarify appropriate forms of policy intervention. However, it is also clear that future progress requires more systematic attention to feedback loops between local pilot projects and the overall federal governance system, including senior decision makers at both the

bureaucratic and political levels. Only through such robust, multi-level policy dialogue will the substantive lessons generated about collaboration actually lead to stronger enabling frameworks for line departments to cross boundaries in pursuit of better solutions “on the ground.”

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