

---

## Collective Impact Case Study: Vibrant Communities



Discovering better ways  
to solve social problems

This case study accompanies a [video interview with Paul Born and Liz Weaver](#), president and vice president of the Tamarack Institute.

## Summary

Vibrant Communities is a multi-tier collective impact effort that unleashes the potential of communities across Canada to substantially reduce poverty and to ensure a good quality of life for all citizens.

## Problem

By the early 2000s, efforts to reduce poverty in Canada had stalled:

- National poverty fell from 29% to 13% between 1961 and 1977, but lost momentum in the late 1900s and remained in 14-19% range through 2000s.
- Human service agencies struggled to meet community need as they simultaneously faced increased demand and decreased funding.

Innovation and collaboration were needed to regain momentum in Canadian poverty reduction.

## Collective Impact Beginnings

In the early 2000s, a community group called Opportunities 2000 realized that it had reached a plateau in its ability to reduce poverty and needed innovative solutions. The group engaged over 80 different organizations to design and implement nearly 50 poverty reduction initiatives in the Waterloo region. Over the following two years, leaders of Opportunities 2000 reflected on lessons learned from this collective effort and engaged representatives from poverty reduction initiatives across the country to discuss replication. After a 2002 summit, the group decided to launch pilot collaboratives in six communities across Canada. Opportunities 2000 became Opportunities Waterloo Region, but the leaders of Opportunities 2000 left to form and lead a new organization – bringing with them the on-the-ground experience they had earned leading Opportunities 2000. This new organization was called Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement. It would serve as the backbone for the set of six collaboratives that has since grown into a national multi-tier collective impact effort known today as Vibrant Communities.

### Key Facts

**Initiative / backbone name:** Vibrant Communities / Tamarack

**Year initiative formed:** 2002

**Mission:** Create and grow a movement of diverse leaders and communities from across Canada who are committed to exploring, challenging, and testing ways to unleash the potential of communities to substantially reduce poverty and ensure a good quality of life for all citizens

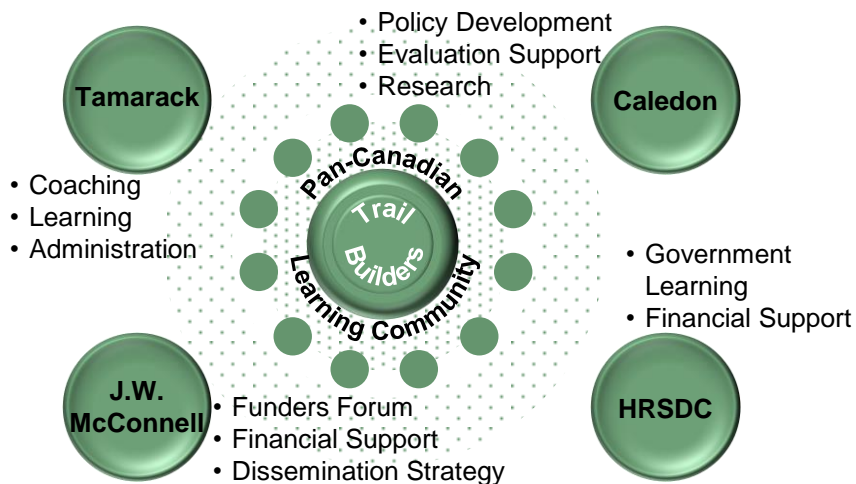
**Geography:** 50 communities across Canada

**Impact area:** Community Development - Poverty Reduction

## Structure

Vibrant Communities is overseen by a steering committee composed of four national sponsors: Tamarack serves as a national level backbone; the Caledon Institute of Social Policy is a think tank that creates awareness of policy implications; the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation provides funding and develops a national strategy to promote the work; and a national government department, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), provides funding and serves as a link between the initiative and the government.<sup>1</sup> The below image illustrates the distinct activities of each national sponsor and how they connect with the overall structure of the multi-tier collective impact initiative.<sup>2</sup>

### Organizational Structure of Vibrant Communities



Since its founding in 2002, Vibrant Communities has grown to include 13 linked regional collective impact initiatives. More recently, this effort has scaled to more than 50 communities across Canada. Participating communities have locally designed initiatives, each with a multi-sector leadership team.<sup>3</sup> Community leaders, policy makers, and funders from each regional initiative participate in a membership-based learning community called the Pan-Canadian Learning Community (PCLC) to share experiences and offer mutual support and guidance.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Leviten-Reid, Eric; Tamarack, *Inspired Learning: An Evaluation of Vibrant Communities' National Supports (2002-2012)*. Published 2012. Accessed June, 2013. Page 24.

<sup>2</sup> Image adapted from "Partners and Friends," Tamarack. Accessed June, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Tamarack, *Inspired Learning*. Page 12.

<sup>4</sup> Tamarack, *Cities Reducing Poverty*. Accessed June, 2013.  
[http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/index/CRP\\_Brochure.pdf](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/index/CRP_Brochure.pdf)

A subset of these regional collective impact initiatives receives extra financial and technical support from the national initiative to pilot ideas. This group of initiatives, called “Trail Builders,” closely tracks lessons and outcomes that are shared across the learning community and used to improve practices nationally.

Initially, Vibrant Communities was funded by foundations, government funds, and corporate sponsors.<sup>5</sup> The regional initiatives receive grants and matching funds from Vibrant Communities. As the initiative scales up to include more communities, the funding relationship shifts. Local community efforts are funded by a wide variety of local partners including local foundations, United Ways, and municipal governments. Nationally, each community pays an annual membership fee to sustain the learning community efforts.<sup>6</sup>

## Results

As of 2013, the work of Vibrant Communities has:

- influenced the lives of 203,000 Canadians who are now better off due to increases in income, access to food, shelter and transportation, and increased skills and knowledge<sup>7</sup>;
- changed over 53 policies and systems to better support poverty reduction efforts including: adjusting policy processes to increase participation of low-income residents in shaping the delivery of programs meant to assist them, and changing the way poverty reduction initiatives are funded<sup>8</sup>;
- engaged about 4,000 partners in the national collective impact effort including businesses, government, voices of experience, non-profits and others<sup>9</sup>;
- mobilized about \$23,000,000 for poverty reduction.<sup>10</sup>

As an element of its work, Vibrant Communities has generated tools, publications, and other process-improvement resources. For example, by 2010 Vibrant Communities had disseminated 223 reports, attracted over 2,500 media stories, and hosted 264 learning events.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> “Partners and Friends,” Tamarack. Accessed June 2013. [http://tamarackcommunity.ca/q2\\_Partners.html](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/q2_Partners.html)

<sup>6</sup> Weaver, Liz. Interview with FSG, July, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Weaver, Liz. Interview with FSG, March 2013; “Vibrant Communities,” McConnell Family Foundation. Accessed, June, 2013. <http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/en/programs/vibrant-communities>

<sup>8</sup> Tamarack, “Vibrant Communities by the Numbers: Cumulative Results as of May 2010.” Accessed June, 2013. [http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/VC\\_by\\_the\\_Numbers.pdf](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/VC_by_the_Numbers.pdf) ; “Vibrant Communities,” McConnell Family Foundation.

<sup>9</sup> Vibrant Communities,” McConnell Family Foundation.

<sup>10</sup> Tamarack, *Inspired Learning*. Page 68.

<sup>11</sup> Tamarack, “Vibrant Communities by the Numbers.”

## Five Conditions of Collective Impact

### Common Agenda

Vibrant Communities shares an overarching goal of connecting 100 cities and communities to reduce poverty for one million Canadians.

Vibrant Communities is organized around the common mission “to create and grow a movement of diverse leaders and communities committed to exploring, challenging, and testing ways to unleash the potential of communities to substantially reduce poverty and ensure a good quality of life for all citizens.”<sup>12</sup> The common agenda outlines five core principles to guide the implementation of this mission across regional collective impact initiatives: poverty reduction, comprehensive thinking and action, multi-sectoral collaboration, community asset building, and community learning and change<sup>13</sup>

Each regional initiative develops its own theory of change (TOC) and two-page strategy to apply Vibrant Communities’ shared mission to the local context<sup>14</sup>

### Shared Measurement

Each regional collective impact initiative has a localized evaluation plan and standardized outcome-tracking template that contributes to a national evaluation system.<sup>15</sup> The partners focus on tracking four levels of poverty reduction: individual and household, community capacity, community innovation, and policy and systems change.<sup>16</sup> Vibrant Communities aggregates, analyzes, summarizes, and shares regularly updated community data to elicit learnings that can “inspire new ideas and strategies across Canada.”<sup>17</sup>

### Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy explains that the complex nature of poverty means “its successful reduction requires a set of linked interventions.”<sup>18</sup> In Vibrant Communities, each regional TOC is determined by local context, but linked to Vibrant Communities’ national goal through the five core principles in the overall common agenda.<sup>19</sup> For example, Vibrant Surrey focuses on the four areas most relevant to local poverty, transportation, housing, income and support, while Vibrant

---

<sup>12</sup> Leviten-Reid, Eric. Page 3.

<sup>13</sup> Tamarack, *Inspired Learning*.

<sup>14</sup> Leviten-Reid, Eric. Page 12

<sup>15</sup> Tamarack, *Inspired Learning*. Page 8.; Tamarack, “Vibrant Communities by the Numbers.”

<sup>16</sup> Innoweave Collective Impact Cast Studies

<sup>17</sup> “Evaluating Vibrant Communities,” Tamarack. Accessed June, 2013.

[http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2\\_VC\\_Evaluation.html](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2_VC_Evaluation.html)

<sup>18</sup> “Vibrant Communities,” McConnell Family Foundation.

<sup>19</sup> “Vibrant Communities,” McConnell Family Foundation.

Abbotsford focuses instead on financial literacy, food security, and living wage.<sup>20</sup> Regional initiatives' activities contribute to both the local TOC and Vibrant Communities' national poverty reduction strategy.

### Continuous Communication

Vibrant Communities relies on strong and continuous communication to share lessons learned and refine strategies. Tamarack hosts monthly convener conference calls and an annual summit to update participants on local developments, share lessons, and strategize.<sup>21</sup> To support learning between the live events, Tamarack hosts a virtual interactive learning website that is updated by a rotating group of thought leaders. Additionally, the initiative distributes a weekly electronic newspaper with stories of inspiration, innovative ideas, and new resources for subscribers.

### Backbone Support

Tamarack's role as a backbone organization focuses on administering Vibrant Communities and supporting the regional collective impact initiatives. Nationally, Tamarack facilitates meetings, administers evaluations, and manages the McConnell Foundation grants. Regionally, Tamarack provides customized coaching to help collective impact initiatives understand poverty in the local context, improve core fundraising skills, and develop and implement local strategies.<sup>22</sup> Serving as a link between the local and national, Tamarack creates momentum around the common mission and convenes different multi-regional learning communities where participants can exchange ideas and learn from their peers. Tamarack has annual revenue of over \$1.5 million and five staff supporting Vibrant Communities.

Each regional initiative has its own backbone with one to four staff and revenues ranging up to \$500,000. Regional backbones help to create strategies to meet the local context, administer the work, convene meetings, manage data, and serve as liaisons to Vibrant Communities nationally.

## Lessons Learned

**Navigate power dynamics to incorporate perspectives of people with lived experience:** Tamarack has been deliberate about inviting people with lived experience to join leadership roundtables, but has found that power dynamics often stifle the impact of their contributions. In one instance, Tamarack amplified the voices of those with lived experience by recruiting 50 low-income community members to form a separate focus group where issues could be discussed in a safer space. Focus group leaders were themselves low income, and participated in both the focus group and the leadership roundtable. The ability to bring the voice of the group to the leadership roundtable provided the low income participants

---

<sup>20</sup> "Framework for Change," Vibrant Surrey, Published 2010. Accessed June, 2013. <http://www.vibrantsurrey.ca/press-room/vibrant-surreys-framework-for-change/>; "About Us," Vibrant Abbotsford, Accessed June, 2013. <http://www.vibrantabbotsford.ca/about-us/>

<sup>21</sup> Tamarack, *Cities Reducing Poverty*.

<sup>22</sup> Tamarack, *Inspired Learning*. Page 24, 34, 41.

authority and power to strengthen emerging ideas. Through such structures, people with lived experience have the opportunity and agency to help shape the initiatives intended to benefit them.

**Incentivize funder involvement in the initiative:** Tamarack maintains a practice of involving funders in the initiative beyond their direct financial contribution by encouraging participation in initiative convenings and organizing a community of practice where funders can share knowledge and develop expertise.<sup>23</sup> The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation models funder participation by directly engaging in Vibrant Communities' learning activities.<sup>24</sup> Tamarack has seen great success with expanding this practice. One funder was persuaded by Tamarack to learn more about the initiative and, impressed with his learnings, increased his financial contribution by ten.<sup>25</sup> Tamarack has found that funder participation increases knowledge and trust, which in turn leads to greater commitment through challenges. It also opens the door for funders to recognize and offer relevant additional resources both financial and via connections to new groups of community people, including other funders, politicians, and community leaders.<sup>26</sup>

**Experiment with Developmental Evaluation:** Finding that traditional forms of evaluation do not suffice to measure and improve complex community change, Tamarack has embraced experiments with Developmental Evaluation, "a tool for evaluating complex problems and adaptive solutions."<sup>27</sup> Referring to complex community change as a mystery, not a puzzle, Mark Cabaj explains, "In a puzzle, if you do your homework and get more data, you will solve the puzzle. . . . In a mystery, it's not so much data as sense-making that's really critical."<sup>28</sup> It is the real-time processing of information and "sense-making" of the feedback that distinguishes developmental evaluation from other forms of evaluation and has made it a particularly successful tool for Vibrant Communities to learn about and improve their approach to poverty reduction.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> "Communities of Practice," Vibrant Communities. Accessed June 2013. [http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2\\_CofP.html](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2_CofP.html)

<sup>24</sup> Tamarack, *Inspired Learning*. Page 27.

<sup>25</sup> Born, Paul. *Community Conversations*. Page 43.

<sup>26</sup> Born, Paul. "Community Engagement," Presentation at Channeling Change. March 2013

<sup>27</sup> Tamarack, *Evaluating Vibrant Communities: 2002-2010 Summary*. Published 2010. Accessed June, 2013. [http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/VC\\_Evaluation\\_Overview.pdf](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/vc/VC_Evaluation_Overview.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Preskill, Hallie and Tanya Beer, *Evaluating Social Innovation*. Published 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Cabaj, Mark, "Developmental Evaluation in Practice – Webinar Questions Answered." Posted May, 2013. Accessed June, 2013. <http://www.fsg.org/KnowledgeExchange/Blogs/CollectiveImpact/PostID/444.aspx>

## Contact

For questions or comments on this report,  
please contact:

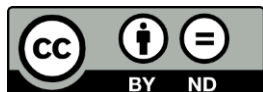
**Jennifer Splansky Juster**

Director, FSG

[jennifer.juster@fsg.org](mailto:jennifer.juster@fsg.org)

All statements and conclusions, unless  
specifically attributed to another source, are  
those of the authors and do not necessarily  
reflect those of the other organizations or  
references notes in this report.

This report was first published  
September 10, 2013.



Collective Impact Case Study: Vibrant Communities by FSG is  
licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.  
Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at [www.fsg.org](http://www.fsg.org).





## FSG

FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation, and research.

Our international teams work across all sectors by partnering with corporations, foundations, school systems, nonprofits, and governments in every region of the globe. Our goal is to help companies and organizations—individually and collectively—achieve greater social change.

Working with many of the world's leading corporations, nonprofit organizations, and charitable foundations, FSG has completed more than 600 consulting engagements around the world, produced dozens of research reports, published influential articles in *Harvard Business Review* and *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, and has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Economist*, *Financial Times*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fast Company*, *Forbes*, and on NPR, amongst others.

Learn more about FSG at [www.fsg.org](http://www.fsg.org).