



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Community Development Manitoba – style

For fashion trends the world looks to Milan; Copenhagen has become synonymous with urban planning; but for community development, Manitoba is increasingly the source for inspiration and cutting edge policy. Manitoba's home-grown approach to community development is being studied by other cities looking for ways to deal with the complex challenges of poverty and social exclusion. This past week, the Victoria Social Planning Council invited CCPA Manitoba to British Columbia to present research from the *State of the Inner City Report* at a "Place-based Community Forum". Unlike BC, Manitoba fosters opportunities for citizens marginalized by poverty and social exclusion to become involved in local neighbourhood revitalization, with very positive results.

Manitoba has a long history of social justice movements. Manitoba was the first province to grant women the right to vote, home of the 1919 general strike, and is the location of one of the first Aboriginal friendship centres in the country. Our province is imbued with the spirit of solidarity and cooperation borne from a strong trade union movement and rural agricultural roots. First Nations teach us of the importance of considering the impact of our actions seven generations from now. These values inform community-organizing efforts towards social justice in Manitoba.

Winnipeg's Inner City in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a place of divestment and concentrated urban decay. The rise of the suburbs had left the core of the city in trouble: boarded up storefronts and arsons in abandoned buildings were coupled with low graduation rates and high unemployment. Inner City activists got together and

organized. Eventually several neighbourhoods created Community Renewal Corporations, modeled after organizations in the US that aim to meet both economic and social goals.

In 2000, the provincial government responded to these grassroots efforts with the creation of Neighbourhoods Alive!, an inter-departmental program providing funding to Community or Neighbourhood Renewal Corporations (NRCs) and program funding to communities with indicators of distress. NA! now funds 13 NRCs operating in urban and rural communities in Manitoba.

The province has invested widely in community development and place-based approaches to renewal. One example is Lord Selkirk Park, a public housing development in the North End of Winnipeg previously half empty with high rates of crime, is completely renovated and fully occupied with resources for residents. Many adult residents in Lord Selkirk Park are able to complete high school thanks to an adult learning centre on site. Family and child care centres also provide resources and services. Manitoba Housing and Community Development contracts with social enterprises that hire and train local residents to do renovations like this, helping people struggling with poverty to build skills and work experience. Place-based approaches such as this are being adopted in communities across the country; residents overwhelmed by poverty need complementary supports and resources close to home.

there is an alternative.

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The NA! policy framework requires the development of a Community Plan, facilitated by the NRCs and residents of the community. Different than a municipal land-use plan or secondary plan, the Community Plan identifies social and economic assets and areas of need in the neighbourhood or region. Lord Selkirk Park, for example, was identified as an area for renewal in the North End, and the North End Community Renewal Corporation partnered with a number of key community-based organizations, governments and foundations in the redevelopment.

NRCs create spaces for local people to participate in identifying and addressing the challenges they see around them. This is participatory democracy; residents and stakeholders in NRC communities have direct influence over decisions that affect their lives. In our current electoral democracy, opportunities to participate in policy and program development are rare, especially for those marginalized because of economic status, race, ability, age, gender etc. But in NRC neighbourhoods there are multiple ways for people to get involved: by learning about local services at a block party, participating at a community forum or volunteering on the board of directors of a local organization. In the process, people build skills, relationships and community.

While the Manitoba model has enabled a lot to be accomplished, there is a long way to go. Community development efforts must work in tandem with a strong social safety net. Local initiatives to improve conditions for low-income residents are challenged by low Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) rates, the low income housing crisis and people falling through the cracks of social systems. Governments and community must work together to address the problems of poverty and need to ask at what level is it most appropriate to respond to a need: at a system level or community level? For example, many communities are creating food security programs as low EIA rates require people to use their food budget to cover rent. To truly address this issue, the system-wide response should be to

improve the EIA housing allowance, while the community-level response is to develop place-based programs to increase access to healthy food, skill-building opportunities and foster community around healthy eating.

Grassroots efforts to identify and respond to local challenges can be frustrated when governments, operating in silos and focused on accountability, place restrictions on local priorities. Addressing poverty requires long-term strategies and long-term investment. To address the root causes of poverty, a sustained and substantial investment is needed. The province has piloted an initiative to reduce red tape and provide multi-year funding to 35 programs. This is a good start. When the goal is improving socio-economic conditions, governments and community organizations need to work in a true collaborative partnership. Accountability runs both ways and the policy framework and funding arrangements must reflect this.

Organizations around the world, such as KIP International and jurisdictions like BC are learning from Manitoba's approach. At the same time Manitoba must learn from BC. When, after a decade of NDP government, the BC Liberals gained power in 2001, deep cuts were made to social programs: employment and training programs and many not-for-profit organizations were "defunded". The impacts are still being felt as BC struggles to deal with the highest child poverty rate in the country.

The benefits of Manitoba's unique approach to community development should be widely recognized and protected. It can take years to build capacity and infrastructure to address the complex challenges of poverty and social exclusion. However, unless future governments continue to set community development as a priority, this progress can be quickly undone.

Molly McCracken is the director of the CCPA - MB

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