

Toronto Neighbourhood Centres (TNC) CD-Renewal Initiative

I) Project Goal:

The TNC CD-Renewal project will contribute to building our city's "connective tissue" by supporting nonprofit organizations to realize more of their CD vision, increase their CD capacity in communities, support other constituencies engaged in CD work (institutions, community groups and networks), and become lead champions of the need to expand community development practice in our city. We contend that strengthening nonprofit organizations to facilitate CD work will in turn strengthen communities by increasing equitable opportunities for collective action to promote social justice.

Over the course of two-years (Sept 2006-2008) the TNC CD-Renewal project will popularize strategies for organizations to maintain "CD practice in tough times", reinforce the work of current CD practitioners, and help to rekindle the organizational capacity of non-profit community agencies to carry out community development practice. We also expect this work to strengthen the leadership and resolve within the non-profit social service sector to champion the need for more flexible funding arrangements with governments in order to unleash the significant community development capacity of community organizations.

II) Project Context:

Our Understanding of Community Development & Why it is Needed in Our City

One of the fundamental challenges facing our city is the lack of "connective tissue" linking community residents together, and linking local networks and peer support groups to community agencies, government services, and institutions. These are the building blocks needed for democratic participation and real civic engagement, but they are significantly lacking in many areas of our amalgamated City.

At the most basic level we are lacking adequate capacity to sustain ongoing opportunities for diverse community members and constituencies to express their perspectives, to make connections across silos, identify shared issues, and be supported to work collaboratively to improve their communities (both neighbourhoods, and communities of interest or affinity).

TNC members understand community development as this process of collective discussion and action that helps identify common challenges and assists people to work together to make changes in their community (both changes in local conditions directly, and changes in policies and practices that affect those conditions). Some examples of this kind of practice that can be supported by neighbourhood centres and other non-profit organizations include:

- outreach to community members who don't come to agencies (this includes door-knocking, linking to places of worship, etc);
- organizing community forums for people to come together to identify and solve problems (e.g. Town Hall meetings);
- supporting leadership in the community (e.g. participant involvement in Advisory Committees, Boards, volunteer and leadership training and mentoring, etc);

- networking (organizing community and volunteer groups to come together, sometimes with and sometimes without agencies);
- public education (bringing information to community members about policies or external factors that affect or will affect their lives);
- organizing advocacy efforts with community members;
- planning, including gathering input from the community, developing options for the community to consider, helping marshal resources to implement the plan.

Our city needs these community development supports now more than ever, across cultures and languages, between newcomers and longer-term residents, across income groups, and to bridge other differences that can generate conflict and exclusion. TNC believes that this objective needs to be a central pre-occupation of our municipal government, institutions, the non-profit sector, and concerned Toronto residents.

The Role of CD in Community-Based Organizations

Community nonprofit organizations can be a critical resource for civic engagement and social change. They are in a position to play a central role in networking and collective action, convening, discussion and community problem solving, and facilitating processes that help to articulate shared agendas across diverse community constituencies. At the same time they are community-directed infrastructure anchoring the delivery of direct services to individuals, families and groups. Their promise is one of a holistic integration of service-provision, community engagement and collective action to promote broader social change. But this promise is far from being realized at the present time.

Significant changes to the funding expectations and objectives of government over the past 15 years have re-defined the role of nonprofit organizations, and affected their organizational capacity to undertake CD work. The current funding regime reinforces an attention to individualistic service provision and has established program-funding mechanisms where service costs are no longer fully supported by governments. Flexible fundraised dollars that could support practices of civic engagement aimed at structural or systemic change are now being used to shore up direct services that are critically required in local communities.

In this context a withering of CD skills and expertise within organizations has occurred as they have been overwhelmed with responding to the immediate needs of individuals, increasingly onerous and externally-dictated administrative demands, and struggle to maintain any space for reflection and learning amidst the stresses of day-to-day operations. Many nonprofit organizations have been unable to maintain a focus on their role as sites for broader civic engagement and participation, apart from supporting traditional mechanisms of volunteerism at the program development and Board levels.

Despite these structural impediments members of the Toronto Neighbourhood Centres, along with other non-profit community service organizations, have been successful in sustaining a commitment to and, in some cases, a modest capacity for community development. The TNC members continue to view community development as an integral part of the potential and historic role of neighbourhood centres. The TNC CD-Renewal Initiative intends to move organizations closer to realizing this holistic vision of integrating service-provision, community engagement and collective action.

III) Key Questions and Anticipated Project Outcomes

Four key questions will be periodically reflected upon as this project proceeds, and will be integrated with the evaluation of the project activities:

- 1) To what degree are there existing CD practitioners, leadership and informal networks in local areas across our city, and how can we learn from and support their diverse CD efforts?
- 2) What mechanisms can we use to share information and insight, and create conditions for mutual support and learning in a context where practitioners have little time to step back from intense and all-consuming work obligations?
- 3) In the current context, to what extent can a peer-learning and information-sharing strategy increase the capacity of community organizations to carry out CD work and integrate it more with their service delivery responsibilities?
- 4) Can we expand the non-profit sector's appetite for CD work, and in turn increase collective efforts to advocate for reforms in the government funding mechanisms that constrain the community development roles of non-profit organizations?

Specific Outcomes we hope to achieve:

- Identification of existing CD capacity that can be built upon in various regions, and among various communities-of-interest in the city.
- Creation of (or strengthening existing) CD peer support and information-sharing networks ("CD-Nets") across five regions of the city that will: increase opportunities for CD practitioners to share their insight and expertise; articulate supports needed for practitioners to achieve their goals more effectively; build shared action agendas where practical, and; support these agendas towards implementation (e.g. developing project proposals, connecting local initiatives to city-wide supports and resources)
- Propagation of promising CD capacity-building practices among Toronto's nonprofit social service networks via:
 - A bi-monthly e-mail newsletter
 - Documentation of at least ten Toronto case studies showcasing strategies for integrating CD work with service delivery
 - Creation of related discussion modules (context, strategies, case studies, further resources). Presentation of these materials and facilitated discussion with at least 15 Boards of Directors and at least 5 additional networks or collaborations
 - Organizing a Toronto forum for information-sharing and learning with the Building Movement Project staff
- Increased capacity on the part of at least twenty nonprofit organizations to integrate community development practices with their work, indicated by increased board and senior staff awareness and leadership, and an increase in organizational resources dedicated to CD activities.
- Increased sector-level efforts to alter conditions constraining CD activity in nonprofit organizations.