



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres Community Development Renewal Initiative

Final Report
December 2008

Executive Summary [DRAFT]

In November of 2006 Toronto Neighbourhood Centres (TNC), an association of 32 multi-service community agencies across Toronto, embarked on a two-year effort to strengthen agency involvement in community development (CD). The initiative was conceived as a series of interventions that would support social service non-profit organizations in Toronto to participate more actively in systemic change work. As an association of member agencies, we approached this work as a “field building” initiative to support discussion and thinking across a number of organizations, and to stimulate an appetite and capacity for individual agencies to determine their own path forward.

Objectives and Activities

Our objectives were to support TNC member agencies to realize more of their CD vision by:

- Assisting them to critically examine and articulate their organization’s role in CD.
- Increasing their awareness of CD practice and resources.
- Increasing their capacity to achieve the CD roles they define as important.
- Enhancing the ability of member agencies to support and partner with other constituencies and groups engaged in CD work.

Over the course of the project TNC members were supported by two part-time CD Renewal Facilitators, Tanya Gulliver and Abigail Moriah, to strengthen their CD work via a range of strategies including:

- Peer learning and knowledge-sharing
- Research on CD practice and case studies documentation
- Networking
- Organizing a 2-day Building Movement Conference: October 2007
- Helping to create the Toronto Community Development Institute: April 2008 Conference
- In-depth training and technical assistance for individual agencies

Project Outcomes

- **Increased Awareness**
Project activities were successful in raising awareness and discussion, changing the stated intentions of some community organizations, and assisting others to redouble their commitment to community development activity as part of their practice.
- **Increased Use of Dedicated CD Roles in Agencies**
Many more organizations have been successful in introducing, or strengthening an already present staff function that is dedicated to a CD facilitation, planning and training role.
- **TNC CD managers/workers network**
A group of staff across TNC agencies are meeting bi-monthly to share strategies, support each other, and collaborate on joint initiatives.

- **Toronto Community Development Institute**
Collaborations with academic institutions and other stakeholders in Toronto shaped a new learning and networking support for community development workers – the Toronto Community Development Institute. A three-day conference was held in April 2008 with over 600 participants. A second institute is planned for April 2009.
- **Case Studies and Promising Practices**
The TNC CD-Renewal Initiative has documented promising practices and approaches to agency-supported CD work. These fifteen 2-page documents are posted at <http://neighbourhoodcentres.ca/torontocd/index.htm> [see Appendix B for listing]

Key Learnings

The challenges of maintaining, growing, and integrating community development practice within today's social service settings are complex. There is no one-size-fits-all organizational change process that can be overlaid upon an agency's structure to generate immediate results in terms of increased community development capacity. We do know that community development requires that organizations strive to maintain five building blocks for CD:|

- an **awareness** of the relationship between individuals and their broader systemic context
- a **commitment** to reforming or transforming inequitable conditions
- a **theory** (explicit or implicit) about how desired change happens
- a **cluster of staff** at senior and front line levels of the organization who can act as champions of change, and
- ways to translate this knowledge and commitment into **effective community practice**.

Where agencies have been able to sustain CD manager or coordinator positions, we found those that combined community development and organizational development responsibilities to be most effective. We also found that community agency efforts at supporting social change were greatly enhanced or hampered by broader systemic conditions – particularly with regard to the existence of a thriving and equitable labour market, strong public services that meet basic needs, and social movements that can articulate and sustain a broad appetite for reform.

Moving Forward: Reclaiming Time for CD

There is a growing awareness that service delivery in isolation cannot lead to long term capacity building in communities. And there is a renewed interest on the part of many organizations to re-frame their work and strategic priorities to include an active commitment to integrating service provision and social reform.

Now more than ever it is essential for core groups of CD-positive staff, within and across agencies, to sustain a healthy tension in community organizations, supporting other staff, and creating systems that can balance the intense pressures to respond to immediate needs with opportunities to change systems that aren't working.

Our next challenge is that of reclaiming time for practicing community development in social service settings. We need to transition from discussions and opportunities that seek to build staff confidence in understanding issues and social change strategy, to actually expanding our ongoing capacity to engage, plan and act with program participants and community members. This in turn will require concerted and collaborative agency efforts to reclaim time that is increasingly monopolized by direct service work and overly-excessive administrative tasks imposed as a condition of some funding.