Neighbourhood Change Research Partnership

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Neighbourhood-based Local Economic Development Activities in Toronto: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

15 February 2015

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1. Rationale & Potential Policy Relevance

The Local Economic Development (LED) sector has consolidated in Toronto in recent years, having now become a strategic focus of community-based organizations, philanthropic foundations, and social policy planners. This convergence of focus on LED also marks a transition from supply-side approaches oriented to attracting industrial jobs and business investment; instead the contemporary LED sector in Toronto has emerged out of and aligns closely with poverty alleviation initiatives. Practitioners emphasize neighbourhood-based strategies that promote equitable economic development as part of an overall placed-based community development approach.

Despite the formidable proliferation of neighbourhood-based LED in Toronto, the necessarily dispersed nature of its implementation has made it difficult to keep track of the range of programs and practices associated with it. Much innovation of course transpires in the flux of everyday practice. Neighborhood-scale practitioners rarely have occasion to learn from one another and compare initiatives across space and scale, and the agencies funding and supporting neighbourhood-based approaches often lack the local knowledge to understand the specific challenges of achieving equitable and inclusive LED. Research is needed to take stock of the state of existing practice, in relation to policy frameworks and enabling or constraining conditions. As always, gentrification and its associated displacement pressures loom as a vexing problem in a city experiencing both socio-spatial polarization and economic/demographic growth.

2. Research Questions

1) What neighbourhood-based LED strategies have been pursued in Toronto (not only neighbourhood-based, but also city-wide and targeted to specific populations, e.g. hospitality workers)? What are their main characteristics, similarities, and differences? What kinds of cross-neighborhood collaborations are evident?

2) Which LED practices have been most successful at stimulating equitable local economic development, and why?

3) How have practitioners anticipated and sought to mitigate problems of displacement related to gentrification?

4) What have been the primary challenges and opportunities for promoting local economic development in an equitable and inclusive manner?

5) What policy supports are necessary to ensure that local economic development transpires in an inclusive manner with an explicit commitment to addressing social-spatial inequality? How could cross-neighbourhood collaboration and policy supports help confront the constraints to inclusive economic development?

3. Specific Fit with the NCRP Objectives & Research Questions

This proposed research project responds particularly effectively to one of NCRP's objectives, namely: "identify public policies and local interventions that have the capacity to mitigate social exclusion and polarization." In Toronto, the research can contribute directly to the new Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020 via the insights it will yield on "economic opportunities," which is one of the strategy's five key focus areas. The research also aims to engage and invigorate Toronto's hallmark Tower Neighbourhood Renewal (TNR) initiative by furnishing concrete recommendations for mobilizing the new RAC (residential apartment commercial) zoning to build viable, socially inclusive commercial spaces in low-income high-rise communities.

A community-based research design is intended explicitly to foster cross-neighbourhood learning and dialogue among diverse stakeholders, as well as research training opportunities for community-based collaborators. Strong community-university collaboration will allow the community partners to harness the research project in support of their ongoing organizing and economic development efforts while at the same time holding research accountable to local communities. The contribution to policy supports is similarly built into the research design through a review of the policy context, interviews with municipal and agency personnel, and an exchange with colleagues in Vancouver who have been developing strategies for commercial revitalization without displacement. The proposed research will thus contribute to wider NCRP goals of building local capacity and supporting program and policy development.

4. Research Design & Methods

The objective of the research is to perform an environmental scan of neighbourhood-based local economic development practices in Toronto, out of which 3-5 case studies may be selected to probe enabling and constraining conditions. Research subjects will include practitioners, advocates, funders and policy makers with the goal of developing a typology of neighborhood-based LED approaches in Toronto—highlighting their main characteristics, challenges and achievements. The environmental scan and resulting typology, as well as a proposed exchange visit to Vancouver, will allow the research to identify effective practices, enabling conditions for key achievements, and lessons that can inform policy and program options to effectively address the consequences of urban inequality.

1. Archival analysis of LED programs and policy in Toronto
    1.1. Begin to build typology
    1.2. Analyze municipal policy, council reports, agency work plans and annual reports, academic and professional research reports on local economic development
    1.3. Begin to identify key informants and potential case studies
    1.4. Assess 'treatment' of gentrification, displacement and inclusivity in LED sector.
    1.5. Track trajectory and trends in LED in Toronto since 1971, particularly the balance among neighborhood-based, city-wide and population-targeted approaches and the relationship of LED to poverty alleviation strategies

2. Semi-structured interviews with leaders in the LED sector in Toronto—agencies, funders, municipal departments, policy-makers, and long-time practitioners
    2.1. Continue to build typology & to identify key informants and potential case studies
    2.2. Assess strategies to confront gentrification and displacement and to build inclusivity
    2.3. Assess perspectives on neighbourhood-based approaches in relation to city-wide and population-targeted approaches
    2.4. Assess perspectives on policy framework for LED and needed policy supports for inclusive LED.

3. Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation with participants in 3-5 neighbourhood-based LED programs selected for deeper case-study analysis
    3.1. Assess experiences of participants in LED programs – perceived opportunities and limitations
    3.2. Assess participant perspectives on gentrification, displacement and inclusivity in LED
    3.3. Build a common analysis of challenges and opportunities faced by different neighbourhoods while promoting

cross-neighbourhood learning

4. Exchange visit to Vancouver BC, to be coordinated in collaboration with NCRP-affiliated colleague Nathan Edelson, who is similarly working with planners, community leaders and researchers to develop approaches to provide municipal supports for inclusive LED
    4.1. The focus of this visit will be to learn about initiatives to preserve the affordability of commercial space in gentrifying Vancouver neighborhoods.
    4.2. The initiatives in Vancouver are as disparate geographically as they are in Toronto (e.g., the municipal Downtown Eastside Local Area Plan, a DTES Business Improvement Area that is developing a charter for protecting affordable business, a planning consulting firm researching strategies to protect small, locally owned businesses during neighbourhood redevelopment, a doctoral student in Planning at UBC working on opportunities to institutionalize social enterprise).
    4.3. Edelson has agreed to coordinate communication but we anticipate one opportunity for face-to-face visits in different Vancouver sites would be necessary to understand the range of (likely uncoordinated) approaches and potentially to catalyze ongoing exchanges via skype.

5. Focus groups (one or two) with LED leaders and practitioners to communicate findings and invite reflection
    5.1. Present and 'check' typology
    5.2. Present and 'check' analysis of trends/trajectories in the sector
    5.3. Present insights from Vancouver exchange visit.
    5.4. Present strategies and perspectives on gentrification, displacement and inclusivity as well as neighbourhood-based vs. other LED approaches.
    5.5. Discuss challenges and policy alternatives
    5.6. Initiate and/or support exchanges among practitioners and leaders, across neighborhoods, and among neighbourhood-based and other approaches to LED in Toronto.

5. Role of Community Partners

Community partners will participate in quarterly research committee meetings; the meetings will provide a venue for vetting research design, discussing preliminary research findings, furnishing practitioners' perspectives on cases and challenges pertinent to LED, and identifying policy and program implications. Community partners will also help identify appropriate interviewees and documentation, facilitate researchers' access to community members, business owners, and stakeholders; and participate in ongoing learning and knowledge exchange processes built into the research design.

Depending on the interest and capacity of community partners, we hope to build a participatory action orientation to the research. This would involve community partners helping to select candidates for community-based researcher (CBR) positions. CBRs will be hired for a short period of time to support interviews and data analysis, as well as participate in research committee meetings.

6. Role of Students / Research Assistants and Contributions to Training

As we are aware that community-based researchers may not be available in every situation, we will also considering drawing on University of Toronto-based research assistants, or, ideally, a combination of RAs and CBRs. The RA (likely only one) would likely be drawn from the Masters in Planning student pool. The proposed study provides the RA with valuable training in applied research and planning action. As the research is located in close proximity to campus and the student's own environment, the general themes and grounded practice using fieldwork methods provides exceptional skill-building experience, opportunities for closely engaged mentoring, and practice in developing links between theory and practice. The RA will also gain a theoretically-informed perspective on local economic development, gentrification and neighbourhood revitalization.

7. Schedule (timeline of research tasks, including deliverables submission dates)

The proposed timeline is 12 months
- Consultations with community partners and a research committee (April - May 2015)

- Ethics review (April 2015)
- Literature and document analysis (April – May 2015)
- Interview schedule design (April 2015)
- Interview 1 (May – August 2015)
- Vancouver exchange visit (July 2015)
- Interim report (August 2015)
- Selection of case studies (September 2015)
- Interview 2 (September – December 2015)
- Focus groups (October 2015 – January 2016)
- Data analysis, including skype consultation with Vancouver group (December 2015 – January 2016)
- Follow-up interviewees (January – February 2016)
- Community forum (February 2016)
- Final report writing (January – March 2016)
- Dissemination (March 2016)

8. Outcomes / Deliverables

- A mid-term report
- A Cities Centre Blue Cover report
- Cities Centre Research Bulletin
- Two or three academic journal articles
- A community forum to present findings and convene stakeholders
- Cross-neighbourhood learning network

NCRP will assist with additional forms of KM.

9. Budget Explanation

We are seeking $19,375 for one-year project. A large portion of the budget will go toward paying a salary of the co-investigator.

Co-investigator (@ $30/hr + MERCS x 8 hr/week for 11 months)	$ 12,650
Research Assistant (@ $25/hr + MERCS x 85 hours)	$ 2,125
CBR honorarium (@$20/hr x 3-4 hr/week x 20 weeks)	$ 1,600
Community engagement (refreshments, printings and publicity)	$ 1,000
Vancouver exchange visit (flight tickets and small per diem) x 2*	$ 2,000
Total	**$ 19,375**

* Based on $900 for a round trip ticket and $100 for 3 days of per diem per person.

☐ Sent to the NCRP's Research Advisory Board for comment: date _____ deadline: _____

☐ Funding approved by the NCRP's Board: $_____ date_____

Approved for funding by Board, 23 March 2015

$19,375

SSHRC Budget Worksheet

	Amount requested from NCRP	Contributions (In-Kind / Cash)	Contribution source	Total Project Cost
Personnel costs				
Student salaries and benefits/Stipends				
Undergraduate *				
Masters *	$2,125			$2,125
Doctorate *				
Non-student salaries and benefits/Stipends				
Postdoctoral				
Co-investigator (@$30/hr + MERCS x 8 hr/week for 12 months)	$12,650			$ 12,650
CBRs honorarium (@$20/hr x 3-4 hr/week x 20 weeks)	$1,600			$ 1,600
Travel and subsistence costs				
Applicant/Team member(s)				
Canadian travel: Vancouver exchange visit (flight tickets and small per diem) x 2*	$ 2,000			$ 2,000
Foreign travel				
Students				
Canadian travel				
Foreign travel				
Other expenses				
Non-disposable equipment (specify)				
Other expenses (specify)				
Community engagement (refreshments, printings and publicity)	$ 1,000			$ 1,000
Total	**$ 19,375**			**$ 19,375**

* Based on $900 for a round trip ticket and $100 for 3 days of per diem per person.