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**Shared Space:
The Communities Agenda**

by

Sherri Torjman

September 2006

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The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the G. Cedric Metcalf Foundation for this work.
This is the first chapter in a forthcoming book *Shared Space: The Communities Agenda*.

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ISBN 1-55382-204-8

Published by

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The Communities Agenda

The goal of the communities agenda is to promote resilience – in order to build strong and vibrant communities.

Resilience is the result of strategic actions taken in four independent, but associated, clusters. These relate to sustenance, adaptation, engagement and opportunity. The four resilience clusters comprise the *substance* of the communities agenda.

The *process* of the communities agenda involves work in the shared space within and between resilience clusters. It is the space between citizens and organizations within each cluster. It is the space between clusters. It is the space between communities and government: the common ground in which private troubles meet public issues. The communities agenda is essentially about creating joined-up communities.

Working in these areas of shared space is neither simple nor simplistic. Organizing for complexity is the first key step.

Shared Space

Small words – big ideas.

Shared space is the physical place we live. It is our home, our block, our neighbourhood. It is the land we walk and the air we breathe. It is the schools, parks, streets, woods and rivers that make up our world.

Shared space is also an emotional place. It is a sense of belonging. It is the place that families and neighbours call home. It is the place we plant our hearts.

Shared space is a conceptual arena. It is a common vision and set of goals. It is a shared understanding of how communities can contribute to well-being and how they can carry out this work. It includes both what they do and how they organize in the face of complex challenges.

Shared space is the focal point for the communities agenda – whose goal is to promote resilience in order to build strong and vibrant communities. The term ‘communities agenda’ refers both to *what* communities can do to foster resilience and *how* best to undertake this work.

Resilience is the result of strategic actions undertaken in four independent, but associated, clusters related to sustenance, adaptation, engagement and opportunity. These resilience clusters comprise the substantive focus of the communities agenda. Its process focuses upon the shared space between citizens and organizations within each cluster, the shared space between clusters and the shared space between communities and government.

The unique role of the communities agenda

This framework refers to the communities agenda as though there is already a common understanding of the term. There is none. At least not formally. Perhaps informally and implicitly because there are so many exciting efforts being undertaken in communities throughout the country and, indeed, the world. There is a palpable energy and vibrancy that have never before been seen. The communities agenda is alive and well in practice though not yet articulated in theory.

So why the need for an ‘agenda’ and, more specifically, a communities agenda? With growing appreciation of the importance of place and the wide scope of innovative activity, it is time to convey the profound transformation under way. The framework presented here tries to capture the essence of these local efforts in order to help them advance strategically together. Its purpose is to provide a common conceptual starting gate.

The intent of a communities agenda is not to set out a single approach for how to undertake work in the shared space. A uniform methodology is not only undesirable. It is also impossible. There is no single best approach to making communities great places. Nor should there be. The precise focus will vary by community and rightfully will be different in every case. The communities agenda is all about local expression within a shared understanding. The agenda is intended to impart conceptual rigour that is guided by – and that guides – effective practice in both substance and process.

The term ‘agenda’ usually implies a structured conversation with a clear purpose. But structured does not mean inflexible. In fact, flexibility is an essential element of the communities agenda. Structured means that the major signposts which guide community efforts – their overall goals, methods and signposts – are consistent in their intent and approach. The distinctive expression of that intent is their unique poetry.

As noted, the goal of the communities agenda is to promote resilience in order to build strong and vibrant communities. But let there be no doubt. *The communities agenda in no way minimizes the need for a solid core of public goods and services. Community-based actions both supplement and complement – but do not replace – public policies focused upon economic and social well-being.*

While the communities agenda is a complement to government intervention, both community work and public policy are linked by shared purpose. They represent an investment in the common good – the well-being of society and the individuals who comprise it. The difference is the primary target of intervention. The unique and crucial role of government is discussed in a later chapter on the enabling environment.

The growing interest in ‘place’

Recent years have seen growing interest in cities and communities as a focus of policy and investment. Recognizing the potential of place as a strategic focal point is not new. Investment in

communities and in voluntary activity, more specifically, existed long before government programs were introduced to tackle major economic and social challenges. What *is* new is the sophistication of emerging community approaches, the scope of the work and the range of actors involved in these local efforts.

Before exploring these emerging approaches, it is essential to address the age-old question: What is ‘community’? Is it a neighbourhood, geographic region, group with similar history or even a loose network of individuals linked by common interest? All of the above. But for the purposes of this framework, community is understood first and foremost as a geographic place. It is a region, city, neighbourhood or town.

Yet while the primary defining feature of community is geography, its geometry is equally important. People come in all sizes, shapes and shades – and it is this fascinating diversity that comprises its social assets. No matter how its physical boundaries are drawn, community begins with people.

As the traditional anchors of life become more tenuous, many search for a sense of belonging. Neighbourhoods and communities – the physical and social space where people live – help fill that need. The interest in communities derives from the recognition that quality of place directly affects the well-being and success of individuals and families. The healthy development of children, for example, depends in large part upon their social context. Dense networks and multiple relationships of trust, which can be built locally only in neighbourhoods and communities, have been found to have a strong positive impact upon health, social cohesion and financial well-being.

On the economic front, communities and the regions they comprise are being recognized increasingly as the engines of nations. A national economy effectively is the sum of its regional economic activity. Economic health and competitiveness, in turn, have a direct impact upon the availability and quality of employment. Both are prime determinants of prosperity – or poverty as the case may be. Communities also foster learning and networking, which are core ingredients of innovation.

The key to competitiveness lies in the ability of local regions to attract highly skilled workers. In the current economy, knowledge and skills have become critical factors of production. In order to draw the talent they need to compete successfully, large urban centres in particular must pay more attention to quality-of-life factors than they had in the past. These centres are viable as regions only to the extent that they have a clean environment and social amenities, such as decent affordable housing, parks, trails, and recreational and cultural programs. Cities, communities and regions are more aware of the need to establish and maintain their competitive advantage.

But there are also reasons on the negative side of the equation to pay attention to communities. Most struggle with a range of stresses related to complex social problems – racial tensions, social exclusion, unstable housing tenure, homelessness, drug abuse and domestic violence – though these problems are not unique to large cities.

The communities agenda is rooted in resilience

The communities agenda sets out a framework for promoting strong and vibrant communities. The framework is shaped in large part by the concept of *resilience* – deemed relevant because it deals fundamentally with the ability not only to cope but also to thrive in the face of tough problems and continual change.

Equally important, the concept of resilience embeds a feeling of optimism about the future and the conviction that there is a better way to tackle complex challenges. The communities agenda carries with it an excitement about opportunity and a sense of passion about what is possible. It is an inherently forward-looking and positive agenda. It is this feeling of hope that underpins the communities agenda because it speaks fundamentally to the capacity and potential of local action – if it is sufficiently broad-ranging and strategic.

The notion of resilience is rooted in the thinking on sustainable development whose purpose is to improve the quality of life for all humanity. The term was defined in 1987 by the World Commission on Development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The unique contribution of sustainable development is that it moves beyond economic indicators as the sole barometer of a nation's well-being. It considers environmental, social and cultural domains as equally important factors in the societal equation. The communities agenda focuses primarily upon the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development.

Sustainable development basically says that wellness involves far more than wealth. A society is more than its economy. Within the context of sustainable development, the focus upon economic growth and prosperity takes its place beside equally essential environmental, social and cultural objectives. It is concerned with clean air and water, nutritious food and decent shelter, good health and safe neighbourhoods, stable roots, and strong sense of self and belonging.

The traditional goal of communities – and indeed of nations – has been to create a well-functioning economy in order to reap the associated social benefits. Conventional wisdom dictated that a focus on prosperity and wealth creation would cause all boats to rise. The problem is that many paddlers have no boats. It has become increasingly apparent that social health is not merely the product of a strong economy. It is actually a *determinant* of a healthy economy. A productive economy requires a strong social infrastructure.

Sustainable development has clear links to resilience, which is essentially about sustainability and the ability to survive in the face of shock, pressure, challenge and change. But while there is a general thrust, there is no single definition of resilience. It is a concept employed in fields as diverse as ecology science, organizational management, community development, mental health and child development.

The interpretations of resilience vary widely (and wildly) from national fire and flood emergency preparedness to the cultivation of problem-solving skills in preschoolers. Its practical applications range from high-level activities to be carried out by national governments to personal steps that can be taken by

individuals – though there appears to be a common thread of coping with, adapting to and thriving in the face of some pressure or threat.

ecological interpretation

The ecological literature on resilience is probably the most widely recognized application of the concept. In this stream of work, resilience is often paired with vulnerability – a state marked by a clutch of negative factors. The United Nations Environmental Programme focuses upon vulnerability and resilience as two major anchor concepts in the climate change picture in particular.

In theory, these two dimensions can be understood as polar opposites on the spectrum of well-being. In practice, they are anything but equal opposites. They are points along a conceptual continuum. While the immediate priority is the vulnerability end of the continuum, the broader goal is to pay attention to the full range of actions that contribute to resilience. The concept of resilience has two meanings in the ecological literature, each of which reflects a distinct, but related, dimension of stability.

The first component is more traditional and focuses upon stability near a desired steady state. This conceptualization is considered to be the engineering component of resilience in which ecological systems are seen to exist close to a stable equilibrium. Resilience is the rate at which a system returns to the steady state following a disturbance, such as earthquake, tsunami, hurricane or oil spill. A resilient ecosystem can withstand shocks and rebuild itself when necessary.

The ecological dimension of resilience, by contrast, emphasizes the ability of an ecosystem to adapt to change. This dimension is concerned more with the process of change – with adaptiveness, variability and unpredictability. From this perspective, resilience is understood as the magnitude of disturbance that can be absorbed before the system redefines its structure and processes – effectively how far it moves from its original steady state. These two interpretations highlight the tensions embodied in the concept with its twin notions of constancy and change, predictability and unpredictability.

Some governments have responded to the notion of resilience by developing emergency preparedness or disaster plans. Resilience from this perspective is understood as the ability to withstand external pressures through effective preparation, coping and adaptation. UK Resilience, for example, is responsible for emergency preparedness, response and recovery. Emergencies may arise from natural disasters such as floods or drought, diseases such as bird flu or terrorist attacks. Several critical resilience projects are under way to help counteract the effects of potential chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear incidents.

The ecological stream of literature embodies a double notion of resilience as a capacity both to withstand outside pressures and to adapt to them. Resilience is the ability of a system to maintain its structure and function when subject to disruptive force. Its equally important adaptive capacity is the ability to successfully accommodate the impacts of change. *Survival* and *adaptation* are two distinct but intrinsically related components of this concept.

mental health application

It is clear that the understanding of resilience has been inspired deeply by the study of ecology. But there is another major body of literature that builds on the concept of resilience. The mental health field is concerned with identifying the personal characteristics, behaviours, skills and competencies of individuals considered to be resilient. These are people who have faced great personal challenge and have emerged relatively healthy and strong.

While the ecological interpretation of resilience focuses upon disruption or disturbance such as floods fires, earthquakes or tsunamis, the mental health literature has its own representation of disruptive force – be it the death of a family member, domestic violence, disability or illness, alcohol or drug abuse, or other serious threat to emotional stability. Resilience is the ability to cope with stressful change, and perceived or actual threat.

As in the ecological interpretation of resilience, there is a vast and growing literature on its mental health application. The US-based Project Resilience initiative employs the term “resiliencies” to describe the categories of strengths mobilized in the struggle with hardship. It identifies seven resiliencies that guide the identification of internal strengths: morality, insight, independence, relationships, initiative, humour and creativity.

But internal strengths, behaviours and competencies are only one side of the story from the mental health perspective. External factors such as caring adults, high expectations and possible opportunities make equally important contributions to resilience. The mental health application of resilience focuses upon the interventions required to cultivate desirable personal qualities as well as the outside supports that promote this capacity. Caring relationships, for example, are seen as one way to help young people gain a sense of connection and confidence – both essential internal qualities.

A resilience lens also sees professionals as partners rather than authorities, initiators and directors of the change process. It argues that professionals must understand that the impact of damage may not be as significant as the strengths and resources that previously have been ignored. The damage model of mental health paints individuals as lacking an ability to help themselves.

The challenge model, by contrast, acknowledges the negative effects of hardship but also recognizes the opportunity to respond constructively and creatively. It is more consistent with the resilience approach. It breaks with a long tradition of theory and practice, which emphasizes problems and vulnerabilities in children, families, communities and organizations burdened by adversity. It acknowledges, and indeed celebrates, their power for self-help and healing.

But the mental health literature goes beyond survival and coping. It implies that any person or group of individuals able to withstand difficult circumstances and handle them well is often emotionally stronger as a result. Resilience can be understood as a capacity not only to bounce back from adversity but also to be strengthened and improved by it.

The resilience approach is essentially a strength-based philosophy. There are echoes of this focus on capacity in the increasingly popular asset-based approach to community development. This approach focuses upon the multiple and inherent strengths of communities. No matter how difficult or vulnerable their circumstances, there are always positive features upon which to build.

A related application of the concept of resilience can be found in the child development literature, which explores the factors that contribute to healthy outcomes. Child development links to the mental health field through its identification of the qualities of resilient children – generally seen as optimistic, with a sense of meaning and purpose, confidence and self-esteem. They are able to get the social support they need to overcome challenges.

An extensive literature on nurturing resilience in children discusses how they can learn to cope in the world and make better decisions. While it is not feasible to teach children what to do in every conceivable situation, it *is* possible to prepare them to manage challenging circumstances when these invariably arise. As in mental health, the work on child development moves beyond factors intrinsic to the individual. Research into resilience in families is investigating the role of non-income resources and behaviours that help low-income households cope with poverty and insulate their children from its risks and negative effects.

Studies on vulnerable children raise the significant role of key influences, in addition to low income, upon developmental outcomes. A protective triad – consisting of personal characteristics, close family ties and external support systems – effectively lies at the heart of adaptation. The quality of the social environment, including family, friends, school and neighbourhood, can help mediate the impact of low income and other risks. The evidence calls for family-enabling environments, which encourage positive parenting and opportunities for learning the skills involved in effective problem-solving and conflict resolution. It requires communities to provide opportunities for participation.

Whether viewed from an ecological, mental health or child development perspective, there appear to be several major themes embedded in the concept of resilience. Resilient individuals, families, communities and nations are able to *survive* in the face of ongoing change or imminent threat because of internal strength as well as their capacity to *adapt* effectively to those changes – be it modest or sudden and life-threatening. But beyond mere survival and adaptation, they typically emerge even stronger as a result of the challenge. They *engage actively* in the world around them. They *seek opportunities* to improve their well-being and the quality of their lives. They *thrive*.

Resilience implies a state of wellness characterized by the ability to survive, the ability to adapt or cope with change, and the ability to thrive – to participate and to seek opportunities – as a result of this adaptation. *Resilience is the capacity to thrive in a changing context.*

The broad-ranging literature on resilience points to four groups of independent but linked activity – related to sustenance, adaptation, engagement and opportunity – that contribute to resilience. Actions in all four areas together comprise the resilience equation. While these four groups include a focus on both basic physical needs and ‘higher’ social and psychological needs, they are not intended to be understood as a hierarchy or a set of linear interventions. Resilience is the result of the combined interventions in all areas.

All are important – though a given community may choose to focus upon a certain cluster more actively than the others at any given time.

The communities agenda seeks to ensure that there is sufficient and effective action in all four groups of activity and that they are linked both in planning and in practice. In effect, the communities agenda is not a single agenda. It looks for progress in all dimensions of resilience and must ensure that the individual clusters are working well together – both individually and together.

The challenge is to determine which actions to take to achieve this coherence. How to get from four major streams of intervention to the broader holistic communities agenda? Recent research and practice around *innovation* help act as a conceptual bridge. This framing of the communities agenda was developed by applying the concept of innovation employed in the economic analysis of local regions.

Innovation is the bridging concept

The research on innovation understands local economies as the sum total of several independent but related clusters. Taken together, these clusters act as primary economic drivers. They effectively comprise the substance of the local economy. The major economic clusters are supported, in turn, by a set of foundations that ensure their healthy functioning.

This framework for the communities agenda argues that the concept of economic clusters can apply equally well to the social dimension of communities. The communities agenda is the social application of the concept of innovation. Here's the basis for this argument.

Innovation typically is considered to be the creation or generation of novel ideas, products or processes. But this conceptualization is actually too narrow. While innovation *can* involve the formulation of new ideas, it also entails the application of existing ideas in unique ways or to new fields.

In the knowledge economy, the creative use of existing knowledge is as important as its production. Innovation typically thrives in regions and, more specifically, in communities. The regional level is critical because the factors of space and proximity contribute to knowledge development and the capacity for learning that support innovation.

The creation, storage, transmission, application and exchange of knowledge are best managed through strategic groupings known as clusters. A healthy local economy is composed of major clusters with close interactions and links. Activity within the clusters acts as the main driver of economic prosperity and growth.

From an economic perspective, clusters can be understood as *geographic concentrations of interconnected companies*, service providers, suppliers of resources, customers and manufacturers of related products. Clusters can also include governments and other organizations such as laboratories,

training institutes, universities and trade associations *that provide specialized training, education, information, research and technical support.*

The concept of clusters is rooted in research and practice on sector strategies, which can be traced to the 1960s. In the 1990s, Harvard business professor Michael Porter introduced a modified form of sector-based strategy that stressed the importance of geography, informal relationships and supporting institutions. The focus of economic development shifted to clusters of industries that could gain advantage through co-location and interdependence – in which local firms exchange components and services along with flows of information and knowledge.

Because clusters involve the exchange of knowledge and skills, they are an efficient means of knowledge management. The geographic clustering of people, companies and institutions is considered a powerful mechanism for building and transferring knowledge. The sharing of knowledge, skills and experience is easier when the components of the learning network are in the same place.

There is an active dimension implicit in the notion of clusters – diverse interactions and links within and among various streams of activity. Synergies or multiple benefits arise from these exchanges involving knowledge, skills, human resources, ideas and financing. Clusters represent networks of activity. They represent a common domain – and effectively comprise a shared space.

Organizations within a cluster can take advantage, for example, of economies of scale by further specializing the production within firms, joint purchase of common raw materials to attract bulk discounts or common marketing. Companies can expand the expertise available to them if they locate within a cluster of firms. They can draw upon those with complementary skills to bid for larger contracts for which the individual firms would have been unable to complete.

The cluster approach reflects the systemic character of innovation, which depends increasingly on *interactions among interdependent actors*. The members of a given cluster basically form an ecosystem. Local firms exchange components and services along with flows of information and knowledge. It is the relations between and among firms, and not their mere co-location, which represent the key factor in defining a regional cluster.

In major urban centres throughout the world, the theory of innovation has been translated into practice through a process known as cluster-based economic development. This approach is rooted in the recognition that healthy regional economies are composed of two independent but interrelated parts: key clusters of economic activity and a set of supportive foundations or enabling infrastructure.

Clusters do not function independently from one another. Neither do they operate in a vacuum. They must be supported and sustained by an appropriate infrastructure. Within the model of cluster-based economic development, this supportive infrastructure is referred to as quality foundations. These include amenities such as roads and sewers, an appropriate regulatory framework, access to financial capital and a pool of skilled workers.

The notion of cluster-based development and its application to economic health has been adapted here to the communities agenda. This agenda effectively consists of four main clusters of activity to promote resilience – the capacity to thrive in a changing context. Resilience means *sustenance* in the face of challenge or ongoing change. It involves *adaptation* to a complex and shifting environment as well as active *engagement* with that environment. Resilience involves both a capacity and desire to thrive in response to *opportunity*.

The key clusters that comprise the resilience function are analogous to the economic clusters that act as the drivers of local economies. The actors within the clusters include citizens, groups, voluntary organizations, the private sector and all orders of government. The resilience clusters together comprise *substance* of the communities agenda.

Each cluster is composed, in turn, of a wide-ranging set of actions that fall into one of two streams: individual capacity and community infrastructure. Investments in individual capacity refer to activities that enhance the skills, capacities and assets of individuals or households. Investments in community infrastructure represent an infusion of resources in the supply of amenities and supports that contribute to well-being.

Cluster-based economic development seeks to ensure the health of the main clusters that comprise a given economy. They are guided by relevant knowledge and supported through dense interactions and collaborative relationships. The economic clusters together are sustained by quality foundations – just like the communities agenda requires a supportive enabling environment. The work within and between clusters comprises the process of the communities agenda. It is discussed later along with the context that both enables and sustains this work.

The substance of the communities agenda

The *sustenance* cluster is concerned with a wide-ranging set of conditions related to physical and emotional well-being. It focuses upon basic needs that make up the foundation for human security. While broad in scope, the primary components of this cluster from a social perspective are decent affordable housing and adequate incomes.

Sustenance is also concerned with population health and basic health protections, such as immunization against communicable disease, and with actions that ensure clean air and water. The burgeoning literature on the social determinants of health makes clear the impact upon health of a wide range of social and economic factors. There is also a strong link between the sustenance cluster and the environmental dimension of sustainable development, both of which support good health.

Decent affordable housing is of interest to all nations, though the responses to this need vary widely. Recent work has seen a range of collaborative innovations involving the private sector, community groups and citizens. But investment by governments at all levels remains crucial for meeting the needs of low-

income households in particular. Local governments play a unique enabling role through their zoning and associated regulations.

The concern with decent shelter reflects the very essence of well-being: accommodation comprises the largest proportion of household expenditure. Housing stability is linked closely to health and emotional wellness. Income security helps ensure that families actually can pay for housing and other basics. Income security derives both from wages and self-employment, and from programs that either supplement or replace work-related earnings.

Higher wages and direct payments to households which increase their overall income enhance their capacity to acquire basic necessities. So are measures that lower costs for essentials, such as food or fuel. Rental subsidies are another example of bolstering individual capability – in this case, the ability to pay for accommodation.

Investment in community infrastructure, by contrast, involves direct support for the supply of affordable housing. Many possible interventions help achieve this objective. The end result is more decent accommodation available in the community. It may take the form of new housing units, the conversion from former dwellings into more affordable space, regional housing authorities or nonprofit housing developers. In still other cases, existing housing is retrofit to make it both livable and more reasonably priced.

Clearly, the two streams of intervention are intrinsically linked. The cost of housing depends upon local supply relative to demand. The capacity to pay for housing, in turn, affects the price of housing in any given community and thereby directly influences its affordability. Skyrocketing salaries and high demand in Calgary, for example, have had a dramatic impact upon the price of housing in that city. Rising prices have created hardship for low-income households in particular. It is essential to explore in tandem both streams of actions – related to supply and to capacity to pay.

The *adaptation* cluster consists of the group of actions concerned primarily with basic coping skills and capacities. It would be unrealistic to assume that all personal and societal problems, such as separation and divorce, unexpected job loss, economic recession, personal illness or widespread pandemic, can be entirely avoided. The challenge is to find ways to cope with these stresses and to build the protective factors that help individuals and households face the odds that invariably will come their way – whether through family circumstances or broader social and economic factors.

The fostering of skills related to empathy, problem-solving and literacy proficiency comprises the essence of adaptive capacity. Investment in community infrastructure includes, for example, support for child care, school hubs and settlement assistance for newcomers.

On the personal capacity side of the equation, a foundational building block in the adaptation resilience cluster relates to early childhood development. It is concerned with screening, early stimulation and supports for quality parenting. The literature on child development is rich with evidence on the importance of nurturing resilience – self-esteem, empathy and positive coping mechanisms – at the very earliest stages of life.

Another set of actions in the adaptation cluster relates to social capital interventions that help build strong families and neighbourhoods. There is clear evidence that links social capital to physical well-being, mental health and economic security. It also acts as the foundation for learning. Social capital plays an especially important role in the lives of newcomers and persons with disabilities in that it provides essential networks of support. But additional settlement assistance is required to address specific needs related to language; access to legal, health and social services; links to education, training and employment; and recognition of skills acquired offshore.

The final grouping within the adaptation cluster has to do with core proficiencies in the knowledge economy: literacy, numeracy, basic communications and problem-solving skills. Literacy proficiency, in particular, is essential not just for getting along in the world. It also creates a foundation for the engagement cluster.

The resilience cluster related to *engagement* is concerned with active participation in society. It entails more than simply adapting to social and economic pressures. Engagement reflects a sense of agency – the notion that individuals and communities can take control of circumstances that affect them. Cultural expression, and involvement in public discourse, community decision-making processes, voluntary action and recreation – all are expressions of agency. Their voices and views actually count for something. Their social footprint is meaningful and significant.

Engagement is a function not only of programs and opportunities for active participation. It requires the removal of barriers that make it difficult for some individuals and groups to participate in communities and in society, more generally. Engagement is also influenced by the availability of public space. It is difficult to contribute in an authentic way to communities in the absence of places that enable shared activity and dialogue.

The links between individual capacity and community infrastructure are evident. Participation in recreational activities or sports clearly is made possible by amenities that allow this engagement – paths, hiking trails, parks and pools. Public space facilitates many forms of engagement. Neutral shared space provides a venue, for example, for members of diverse cultural groups to share perspectives and exchange views around common concerns. They can try to work through community tensions rooted in racial difference or religious intolerance. The notion of shared space, in this case, takes on a true physical meaning.

Opportunity comprises the fourth resilience cluster. One stream of work in this cluster involves direct investment in work-related skills development. Recent efforts have sought ways to make training more relevant to the needs and demands of the labour market. Customized training is an example of this trend. It has created bridges among voluntary organizations, the private sector, educational institutions and governments in an effort to find employment opportunities for marginalized workers.

Another set of actions in the opportunities cluster entails the creation of economic opportunities within the context of community economic development – the set of activities and organizations stemming from collective entrepreneurship and guided by principles of democratic engagement and shared profit. These interventions represent investments in community infrastructure.

The opportunities cluster is also concerned with the creation of assets, through measures such as individual development accounts, learning bonds and home ownership. Building financial assets is considered a significant intervention not only for improving sustenance and the capacity to engage in society. Equally important, it fosters independence and choice, and again creates a sense of agency and hope for a better future.

Taken together, the core resilience clusters comprise the substance of the communities agenda. Resilience is the result of substantial and diverse activity in all four clusters, both individually and together. Each cluster itself must be healthy and robust. Links between and among clusters must then be fostered in order to create a coherent agenda overall. Each of the resilience clusters is a complex system in itself. Each is composed of a wide set of actors and actions. Each has a set of parts that contribute to the overarching objective of resilience.

The examples of interventions in all four clusters show how investments in individual capacity and community infrastructure are closely linked within each of these domains. In fact, in some cases, they are inseparable. The school as hub acts as the venue within which to organize activities, such as family-based literacy programs. Investment in community infrastructure in the form of school hub provides the foundation for the focus upon individual capacity – in this case, literacy proficiency.

Despite their innate links, the two streams of intervention within each cluster typically act as though support for one domain has nothing to do with actions in the other. They operate like parallel tracks instead of being intrinsically joined. Most of the activities within a given cluster remain as separate entities within that cluster. The component parts rarely function like a system. They are a set of disjointed pieces in which the left hand often is unaware of what the right hand is doing. This complexity makes it difficult to understand, let alone navigate, the systems within any given cluster. The parts often work at cross-purposes.

In sustenance, for example, activity concerned with affordable housing generally is not carried out with reference to policies linked to income security. In adaptation, early childhood development workers rarely engage with those involved in literacy proficiency – even though their efforts may focus upon the same households. In the engagement cluster, those concerned with marginalized youth or newcomers who feel excluded from the mainstream society are just beginning to build bridges with those in the cultural or arts worlds. In the opportunity realm, activity concerned with skills development typically is separate from the creation of employment opportunities.

Most individuals, groups, organizations and even policies whose interests fall within the same cluster act like ships that pass in the night. There are far too few links among the wide-ranging interventions within the core resilience clusters. The links that do exist are often minimal or sub-critical – in that they do not create substantive change as a result of their exchange. The impact of individual efforts typically is diminished as a result. Moreover, the lack of collaboration can even create negative effects when the impact of one intervention actually works at cross purposes.

Community challenges generally are addressed as a set of distinct factors despite the fact that they are inherently linked and require a set of interwoven strategies for effective intervention. Comprehensive local efforts seek to forge links between and among these key factors.

These strategies recognize, for example, that a training program to help social assistance recipients move from welfare to paid employment will likely not succeed unless prospective workers who are parents have access to affordable child care. Programs to encourage the workforce participation of persons with disabilities must pay attention to their need for disability supports and workplace accommodation. Most children are unable to concentrate or learn if they go to school hungry. It is difficult to focus on studies or training if a household faces eviction at the end of the month.

Each of the individual pieces within a given resilience cluster is significant. Each is an essential building block in the spectrum of actions that foster resilience. But the parts are rarely understood as a set of strategic interventions. They most often operate as one-off programs that may not even survive the limits of their funding arrangement.

Moreover, there are not enough points of interface to create genuine joined-up solutions. The core clusters have not bred the innovation that potentially is possible because they consist of isolated pockets of intervention focused upon their own concerns. The task of the communities agenda is figure out how to harness these clusters of activity in unique ways. Collaboration, explored later, is a core method.

There is a unique shared space in which efforts seeking the same or similar outcomes are not linked. There are also efforts in pursuit of the same or related outcomes that are working against each other. One of the major challenges of the communities agenda is to ensure that the strategic interventions within the resilience clusters work effectively as a system.

A core task of the communities agenda is to create healthy resilience clusters by improving the links among actors within each of the clusters. Its goal is to ensure that the sum total within the cluster is greater than the individual parts. There is a clear need for bridging mechanisms that can join up the various components into more cohesive processes.

Sometimes this bridging role is made more difficult, if not impossible, by the fact that key components of the system are missing. At times it is necessary to fill those gaps prior to playing the bridging function. Affordable housing and sufficient high-quality employment opportunities are prime examples. The main focus of the community efforts is to shore up these weaknesses. But it is equally important to ensure that the component parts – even though there might be some undeveloped or missing pieces – are working together effectively in this task.

The communities agenda involves another type of bridging. Imagine the individual parts of a bicycle. Even if all the parts were present in one room – tires, chains, seat, brakes and handle bars – they would not go very far if they were not all working together. The individual parts are simply that. A bicycle, by contrast, is more than the sum of its parts. Put together, it can go a long way. Pulled apart, it goes nowhere. In fact, it is not even recognizable as a bike. In this case, the bicycle is the community and the resilience clusters are the component parts.

There are currently few links between and among the four resilience clusters to create a coherent whole. *A second core task of the communities agenda is to improve the links among the core resilience clusters.* Examples of this type of bridging currently are the exception rather than the rule. But the exceptions show the vast potential of making the links in the shared space between clusters. A co-operative housing initiative, for instance, has built in a training component in which residents learn the skills of housing repair and management. These skills help them take care of their own property and thereby acquire a marketable skill. This particular initiative is working in the shared space between the sustenance and opportunity clusters.

Another illustration of this bridging function can be seen in the affordable housing project which promotes literacy proficiency and leadership training for youth. This work links the sustenance cluster with the adaptation and engagement clusters, respectively. School programs initiated as supports for immigrant families often provide a venue for volunteering or cultural expression. These types of actions bridge the adaptation and engagement clusters.

A third core task of the communities agenda is to improve the links among communities and governments. To narrow the gap that currently exists between community needs and government policy at all levels.

Perhaps the most significant intervention in this area of shared space is to ensure that the interventions and actions undertaken by communities are accompanied by relevant policy work that enhances or supports the program and relationship changes that they are building. BC Capital Region, for example, has worked hard to create a housing trust fund in which 11 municipalities have come together to combine into one common fund their investments for affordable housing.

The advantage of this integrated approach is that the region will be able to plan more strategically if it is working with one rather than multiple and diverse sources of funds. The region can ensure that this pool of capital grows. It can then determine collectively how much of the pool will go towards supporting individual capacity through rental subsidies and what percentage will be invested in community infrastructure by building new units.

Equally important, the initiative has made an effort to ensure a series of changes to municipal by-laws that will support the development of affordable housing over the long term. The single initiative of creating a housing trust fund has become the foundation for a broader policy environment that enables future work in this area.

Another example of community-government bridging arises around recreation – identified in both theory and practice as an important means of promoting engagement. Community initiatives can work with local governments, in particular, to secure various policy measures that support this involvement. Such measures include, for instance, subsidies for recreational programs, equipment or supplies; lower prices for use of facilities at certain times; or secondment of recreational staff to work with designated groups or neighbourhoods.

Yet another area for bridging: Comprehensive initiatives seeking to develop assets for low-income households have found that their efforts actually have harmed welfare recipients in some jurisdictions. The positive measures inadvertently have resulted in reductions in assistance or loss of eligibility. In this case, work in the shared space would involve engaging provincial governments (and municipal officials in Ontario in particular) to reform their respective social assistance laws and practices. Ideally, government officials would be approached at the earliest stages of a community effort in order to anticipate and avoid potential negative consequences.

In some cases, provinces and municipalities actually have changed their legislation to accommodate various improvements rooted in community efforts. In other cases, the governments did not introduce legislative or policy changes but agreed to protect the initiative by designating it as an exception or pilot that was studying the behavioural impact of a certain intervention.

These are just a few examples of how the communities agenda can help connect communities and governments. Communities are in a unique position to create strategic links in the areas of shared space – within clusters, between clusters and between communities and governments. The communities agenda provides an essential relational function. Collaborative relationships are at the core of this bridging work.

The process of the communities agenda

Four resilience clusters comprise the substantive focus of the communities agenda. Cluster-based economic development, earlier described, pointed out that it is not possible for clusters to survive on their own. They need to be sustained through quality foundations which ensure their health. The process elements of the communities agenda are as important as its substantive focus.

The process of working in these areas of shared space is neither simple nor simplistic. This preliminary discussion of the communities agenda makes clear that it is a complex agenda within the complex setting of communities. The first step in the process of the communities agenda is to organize for complexity – the subject to which we now turn.

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